

- Size + Dark

White Skies

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__***[Sequel to "Red Phantom"]***__ Half a decade has passed since Dream's defeat and with no common enemy on the horizon, many of the SMP's notorious fighters have since parted ways with one another and their realms. It was beautiful, it was everything, and it was meant to stay that way – right? Unfortunately, blood red phantoms still ceaselessly haunt many, even as they move on to seemingly greener pastures. Ranboo tries desperately to fit into his new role among King Eret's ranks and keep up the numerous promises he's made over the years, all while witnessing peace crack and crumble before his very eyes once again. Sam is flung back into a world he thought he had escaped for good, this time with the daunting realization that he's shackling people he loves down with him, and a legend once thought to have evaporated into thin air makes a startling return.

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Prologue: A Regretful Eternity, Or Zephyrus And The Nightmare

Sequel to "Red Phantom"

Same trigger warnings apply to both.

The end of his story began in a cathedral-like cavern, in the middle of a raging war between the undead and the living.

He should have known. As soon as he had set foot into the abandoned mining passage, a manhunt team hot on his heels, he knew that in one way or another it would end. Everything else had gone perfectly up until that point, so perfect in fact that he had briefly wondered if the gods were finally approving of him and his actions. Turns out, they were not.

Anyone else would have thought that a warrior of his skills and fearsome reputation would have fought tooth and nail until his last breath was forcefully cut from his chest. Unfortunately, that was not how it went, not that many knew that. When the end was drawing nearer, he had given up. Just... given up. He had stripped himself of his armour, knelt down in submission in a shallow cavern lake and received the finishing blow willingly.

People had always branded him as insane and if they all knew the true circumstances of his death, they would have only confirmed their claims. They could have probably added "suicidal" to their long list of tasteless words to describe him as well. It was funny how he wasn't the first villain to go out that way. Schlatt had drunk himself to an early grave and Wilbur had ordered his own father to impale him. So many similarities.

But what truly set them apart was still how they went out. The first two still went out fighting. They were still vicious until the end. Dream wasn't.

Dream was exhausted. Exhausted by the fighting, by the hate, by the whole palava with the Revival Book, by the terrible truths and consequences of his actions that accusatory and hurtful remarks from others finally opened his eyes to. It took a while, but they all finally hit home. Maybe he had actually let them in, for once. Either way, he was always the one to blame.

Being feared was always better than being loved, until that fear and hate started coming from people that he himself cared about. Friends he had loved, lost and let go of. As his soul faded from the world of the living, he had watched everything go dark for the last time and he heard no laughter from them. No cries of delight. No form of jubilation, of victory. Not a single sound

rose from any of the figures present, except a strangled whimper of despair from his executioner.

Cowards.

They weren't just any figures, they were his friends. Friends he had betrayed and hurt, some of which he had even killed in cold blood. His death was deserved, and undoubtedly what they had all wanted from the beginning, and yet neither of them seemed to gain any satisfaction when his end finally came about.

Ungrateful.

And above all else, George had taken the glory for it. *George*, of all people! Dream knew that it wasn't a fall he had wanted to take or a reputation he wanted to keep for the rest of history. Many would have given up everything and more just for a chance to slay the Nightmare, but the one who actually did would have probably rather died trying.

He would have wished so especially if he had known where he had sent Dream's soul to for eternity—sent him, perhaps, or maybe Dream had put himself there himself. Dream should have been relieved, in part. The landscape before him was so familiar.

He wished it wasn't. Gods, how he wished he was anywhere else.

The air was thick with an indecisive climate, stagnant with humidity that varied in temperature from freezing cold to stifling hot. It made him both sweat and shiver, trapping him in a perpetual state of queasiness in which he felt constantly sick. It was impossible to get comfortable in any way, shape or form. The obsidian was rough against his back and under his hands and feet. The slivers of purple veins in the crying variety above dripped and secreted their thick, slimy goo that piled up down below before melting and disappearing entirely between the ridges of the stone.

In the distance—too far away to provide any desired warmth and too close to be of any reassurance or comfort to his soul—hung a curtain of bright orange lava. It popped, it sizzled, and it taunted him with the godsforsaken memories of a past he'd rather forget.

Dream was already dead. He could have probably risked walking right up to it, through it and out to what he assumed was some sort of semblance of freedom. He stayed put. His body didn't want to respond to him. Neither did his mind. He was too sick, too tired to do anything. The real Pandora's Vault may have failed to break his will the first time, but this true and confirmed eternity succeeded in only a matter of moments.

(If Sam was here to see it, he'd probably gloat. Dream would in his place. He likely wouldn't, though. Sam was always too well put together, too misguided by his misplaced values and morals to do such a thing, too arrogantly above the rest in every way possible. Like others, he had probably forgotten him anyhow.)

Once again, Dream's predicament in isolation had opened a valve. Thoughts ran out in abundance. Dream hadn't perhaps lived as long as he would have liked to, and he was still relatively young when he died, but that wasn't to discount all the things he had done, both good and bad. He had enough troubled thoughts to last him until the end of Time. He may as well start getting used to the routine.

He drew his knees up to his chest, and gave in. Give in, give up. That was all he ever could do right. Give into anger, into grudges, into bloodlust. Give up at the end of it all. Give and take, give and take. He was the selfish and dangerous epitome of both forces at once. It was both pathetic and terrifying how easily his own mind could bend both ways. It was unstable, indecisive. Untrustworthy.

Something else moved in his cell. A shadow cast by the lava grew closer and closer, swooping in on its hapless prisoner. Lady Death was too preoccupied with the rest of her duties to visit a villain like him. He should have known that it was only a matter of time until she finally sent her Angel in her place.

"Hello, mate. Long time no see."

"I forgot limbos could connect," Dream muttered, his tone half-hearted and bitter.

He didn't even look up. He didn't need to see any hate, resentment, or gods forbid any kind of pity.

"Well, I'll be honest, I don't really know how any of this works. I've just been flying around, visiting a few friends, and I happened to see you. Alone."

There it was. The pity. The godsdamned *pity*. The mere thought of seeing it smeared across the avian's face made Dream seethe and feral enough to snap back.

"What do you want, Philza?" he growled.

"Me? I don't want anything."

Dream still refused to look up, even as the avian shuffled and sat down next to him. The tips of his wings brushed his shoulder. He recoiled. They sat in

silence for a bit, a strangely comfortable one that only put Dream more on edge. There had always been something strange about Philza. Even in a fight, the air around him was bright and airy, devoid of the shadow of Death that many others always had looming over their shoulder—until he did too. But the avian was always too smiley, too bright and chirpy. Dream wanted to yell at the Angel to leave him alone, to shove him away and out of his death forever. He didn't need his pity. He didn't need his companionship.

Yet when he tried to speak or move, his throat tightened and his body refused to respond in any way, shape or form. He tried, but he was shackled down. Frustratingly, he had to tolerate the avian's presence until Philza himself decided to leave. That could end up being centuries from now. Time in limbo worked in mysterious ways. Until then, the silence was too crushing, too utterly haunting to bear. Dream had to break it, no matter how much he didn't want to.

"Everyone sees limbo differently." He raised his gaze a little and stared at the dark expanse of hell before him. "What does mine look like to you?"

He didn't expect Philza to answer him, least of all as warmly as he did. "You're sitting in the middle of a barley field—or maybe it's wheat. I'll be honest, mate, in all my years alive I kept mixing up the two."

Dream didn't care. He closed his eyes and soaked up the avian's words, trying to paint a nice picture, one that was nicer than anything he had seen in a long, long time. After being confined to so much darkness over and over again, it was hard to. He managed nonetheless. A golden field of rippling stems that stood as tall as soldiers. Their husks were softer than the rough obsidian beneath his aching body and scarred fingers, so much softer. They felt like heaven. His fingers dug into the rich, cool earth.

"You're sitting against an olive tree. Its fruits are ripe and smell divine. There's no breeze. The leaves are still."

Dream leaned further back, relishing in the deep ridges and protrusions that pressed into his spine, not from his cell's wall but from the twisting trunk of a dark, honey-coloured olive tree. There was a stark difference between the two, and it was heavenly. The leaves' shadows cluttered the ground before him, blotches of darkness and light scattered around and on him like petals. He could even taste the bitter, oiled tang of the olives on the tip of his tongue.

"And dusk has fallen. You can start to see the stars."

The world flared up. The setting sun lit a spark that made the endless field glow with a bright, blinding light, creating a sea of white that violently clashed with the warm pastel tones of the sky above.

And the stars! Gods, the stars...

Dream had forgotten to say goodbye to them.

He quickly raised his head to try to get a glimpse of the heavens' diamonds he missed so much, only to be torn away from his paradise when his eyes locked with the dark, void-like ceiling that threatened to swallow him whole. His stomach sank again. The tree and barley fields morphed back to hard, jagged stone. The olive smell faded into the gut-wrenching stench of burning. The blazing sunset turned into a curtain of dull, bubbling lava. Once again, Dream was thrust back into his nightmare.

"That sounds nice," he murmured, lowering his head between his knees again.

"Why, what do you see?"

"What I was meant to see. I'm where I deserve to be."

"Pandora's Vault?"

"It's probably the closest thing to eternal damnation my soul could conjure up."

"That's rough, mate."

No shit. His urge to slap Philza grew stronger again. He had to dig his nails into his thigh to try and keep his composure.

"Personally," the avian went on, seemingly oblivious to Dream's growing irritation, "I've been finding the afterlife better than I thought it would be. I mean, I knew that death would be a release and of course I trust my Lady wholeheartedly, but I mean—*fuck!* I would have never imagined something like this! This is paradise!"

This is hell.

"Even Tommy doesn't seem to mind it as much anymore. Either his limbo has changed, or he's just realized that he's not alone and that nothing can hurt him anymore. He's definitely got his mojo back, that's for sure. You should hear his jokes. Right now, his favourite ones involve taking the piss out of Wilbur. He's been using the same material for years now and

somehow it just gets funnier every time. Wilbur has since tried to write a comedy song in retaliation. It's hilarious. I wish Techno could be here too—I don't want him to die, no that's not what I mean at all! That's far too selfish to even imagine. But I just miss him, mate... I miss him more than I can possibly say..."

Phil trailed off, and Dream could finally get a sharp remark in edgeways.

"What do I look like, your personal agony aunt?" he snapped with a growl, finally raising his head. He still only kept his gaze forwards. "What the fuck do you want with me, Phil? If you want to gloat and mock me, just go ahead. Don't dress it up. Get on with it."

"I'm not here to mock you."

"Why else would someone come to see me, then, let alone stay as long as you have?" A sudden, wicked suggestion wormed its way into his mind, making Dream chuckle darkly despite himself. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were here to forgive me."

Philza's entire demeanour suddenly turned cold. It even made Dream's own hair stand on edge.

"I will never forgive you."

Finally, the Nightmare cast a look askance. His emerald eyes met Philza's ice-blue ones with such ferocity that it was almost as if the two of them were ready to pounce on each other right there and then. They probably were. In Phil's gaze, Dream saw anything but tenderness, anything but pity. That suited him absolutely fine.

"What makes you think I would ever *forgive you*, after everything you've done?"

Every single syllable cut like the sharp, precise point of the switchblade that once used to routinely hack at Dream's skin in the real Pandora's Vault. It didn't faze him. Like the actual switchblade, the blades were simply cutting back over the same scars over and over again. It would occasionally hurt, but otherwise the pain would dull until he could barely feel anything anymore. He had been brutalized for so long. It would be hard to find any soft patches left. He was numb to it all. In other words, he was untouchable.

Instead of cowering again, Dream leaned back to enjoy the show. He shrugged as an answer to Philza's rhetorical question. "Surprise me. People change like the tides in the ocean."

Phil scoffed in his face. "Not when you drive two of their sons to their deaths," he growled. "Not when you push Wilbur so far over the edge that he could no longer hold on—not once, but twice. Not when you take all of Tommy's lives, revive him, then take his last one as if his mere existence was some sort of twisted game for you to play."

"I was just doing my job. Fighting my fights, just like everyone else was. Your sons just happened to be my opponents. Should I have given them special treatment because their daddy was in some sort of intra-dimensional relationship with Death herself?"

"Killing Tommy tore more than just my side of the family apart."

"I thought Sam was just guarding the kid like the misguided warden he is."

"He's every inch Tommy's father as I am."

"Two dads? For one kid? I mean, I know Tommy's a handful, but wow. Quite progressive as a society nowadays, aren't we?"

"You enjoy ripping people apart, don't you?" Philza lashed back abruptly. "Tommy and Wilbur among themselves—"

"To be fair, Wilbur was insane. You can't blame the boy."

"Tommy and Tubbo, with your stupid little manipulation before you revived him—"

"It was his own free will. I merely just told him the truth. Too bad if his phantom brain at the time made the wrong decision. They made up in the end. No harm done."

"Sam and Puffy—"

"Again, I simply told her the truth about why Sam was letting me get a few prisoner benefits. They screwed up the rest on their own accord. Anyway, didn't they also get back together after that? Heck, didn't they even become *more* than friends? Last I heard he ditched everyone to run away with her."

"Me and Techno."

"What about you two?"

"Your stupid war killed me and tore me away from him. I never got to properly say goodbye. I will never forgive you for that either."

This time, Dream remained silent, but kept his scowl.

"And what about you, Sapnap and George? The Dream Team that split the moment one of them went rogue. What a nice group of forever friends."

That was a new cut not many had made before.

Philza was just trying to rile him up now. Dream could tell full well. He would lose the element of surprise if he acted on the provocation. Instead, he calmed himself down until every nerve in his dead body was firmly glued to the ground beneath him.

"How's the view from the moral high ground?" he asked in a singsong voice.

"Could be better, after the eyesores get eradicated."

"Don't worry about that, your Lady has dealt with this one—" He gestured to himself. "—appropriately."

"I doubt it. The powers of the gods and your minds are limited, believe it or not. It's unfortunate."

"So you'd want to torture me personally, just like everyone else would?"

Philza got up and stretched his wings, unceremoniously whacking Dream in the face as he did. He paused for a moment, deep in thought. "No," he conceded. "I think you're already doing a pretty good job at that on your own."

He made to fly away, preparing to soar through the obsidian ceiling as if it was nothing but a vast open sky—the avian's limbo painted it that way, at least from what he had said. Dream only wished that he was brave enough to dare to try and escape himself.

If Sapnap and George were here, they would have probably laughed in his face. Not mockingly, but teasingly, with smiles of endearment. He couldn't even remember the last time he had seen them like that.

"Come on, loser," the image of Sapnap in his mind smirked. "Don't be a pussy."

"It's right there," George continued, his laugh so pure and crystalline to his ears, as clear as the water he had killed him in. "Just reach out and take the leap of faith."

You make it sound so easy.

They continued to joke and Dream almost laughed along with them until memories began to trickle in again like a vile mix of blood and ink. They filled up his brain, clogged every vein, spread and tainted the brief moment of joy he had tasted in the past. His best friends' laughs turned into snorts, then all out jeers. Sharp words and tongues lashed at every last hint of a genuine smile and nostalgic pine until he was once again reduced to nothing.

Almost nothing.

He still had enough in him to reach out and grab the hem of Phil's robes. "Wait."

The avian turned back, his gaze thunderous and even murderous. "I've wasted enough of my endless time on you."

"I think you might want to waste a little more."

"I severely doubt that anything could make me stay."

Dream once again found his smile. His sly, cocky grin brimming with ideas and a cunning plan or two. He had missed it oh so very, very much.

He raised an eyebrow. "Try me."

Chapter One: Raise A Glass

The tundra had never been so quiet.

It had never been a truly loud and boisterous land anyway. It was hard to find it habitable. Danger lurked under every crunching footstep, behind every jagged ice-spike, over the surface of every eternally frozen lake and along the sides of the dark granite mountains. The few forests that did somehow manage to grow were frozen solid, the tree trunks as hard as obsidian and anchored to the snowy floor by the branches laden with icicles and heavy frost.

Although the terrain was frozen and unforgiving, life had somehow managed to find a way to make it thrive. When the polar bears weren't plodding along the coast line, the arctic foxes darting between the thickets of spruce and pine or the great grey owls diving down and breaking through the blanket of snow while giving chase to poor, shivering rodents, there would be the barking of dogs in the kennels, the gentle cackle of crow murmurations

pirouetting across the sky, the dry knocks of an axe chopping up firewood or the relaxed humming that floated through the stiff air along with the homely scent of warm dinners and crackling hearths. Hound-drawn sleds zigzagged between the glaciers, connecting the few but ridiculously far apart villages and nomadic settlements.

What should have been a dead and desolate biome had subverted all expectations. Despite everything, it breathed and sighed, exhausted but satisfied with the peaceful tumult that populated its snow banks and mountainous peaks.

And yet, somehow, the part of the tundra that housed the Antarctic Commune had crumbled and died, and no one had realized it until it was too late. Even the weather had deserted it. The wind no longer howled over the hills. The ceaseless flurries of snow had stopped falling entirely. Nothing stirred.

Ranboo could almost hear his own blood rush through his veins. He swallowed hard, if only to break the crushing silence with anything other than words he simply couldn't find. The terrain he had once known was now completely and utterly unfamiliar. The world was too bleak, too white and blinding to his eyes. Even the snow-covered ground was an eyesore.

He didn't want to look up, however. He couldn't bear to. He had hoped that Eret had been mistaken, that he had simply confused one thing with another. It was the first time in Ranboo's fleeting memory that he had willingly wanted the monarch to be so wrong, that he had prayed that Eret had lied to his face.

Unfortunately, the gods were not on his side. His eyes began to water and he couldn't put it off any longer. He raised his gaze. The cold, stone glare of the piglin stared back, motionless.

"It's not really him, is it?"

Ranboo said nothing. A pair of feet shuffled somewhere behind him.

"Ranboo?" Niki called again, her voice wavering.

"I don't know."

It didn't feel like it. The ache in Ranboo's chest was one that heaved with the heaviness of loss, and yet it wasn't one haunted by Death's shadow. He didn't want to look at the statue. He didn't dare touch it either, or stand less than a few feet away. He couldn't bring himself to. Neither it seemed could

Niki. Their other companion, however, had always known to be bold and reckless, some might say to a fault.

Sapnap slipped into Ranboo's peripheral, taking off one of his oilskin gloves. He carefully placed his hand on the frozen shoulder, melting the frost as he did. They waited. A few moments later, the fireborn pulled away.

"It's not him."

"What?"

"It's stone cold. If it was him, it wouldn't be."

"How come?"

"Statue enchantments don't kill, they only freeze someone in Time. The victim literally can't die unless someone physically shatters them. There will be a sign of life, either a faint heartbeat or a sliver of body heat. This one has neither." When faced with their questioning stares, Sapnap shrugged. "The storm has given me a lot of free time to spend in the Kinoko library. I've devoured every book I've set my hands on."

"So, it's dead?"

"Not dead—it was simply never alive in the first place."

All at once, Ranboo's pent-up distress melted away and he let out a small sigh of relief. It was all soon tainted by a small spot of dread that had materialized, and he swallowed down the ball that had climbed up his throat again. The statue wasn't him, but then that begged another, just as pressing question.

"Then where's Technoblade?" He looked at his friends. Just as he had expected, the relieved silence soon morphed into one of gradual and saddened realization. "When's the last time you saw him?"

"About a month, maybe," Niki replied in a small voice. "He came to the bakery. He bought some cookies and paid far more than we asked him for. He didn't say much."

"He came to Kinoko too, about a month ago as well. He had an audience with Karl to warn us of the oncoming storms stretching in from across the tundra," Sapnap added. "He was in and out before I even knew he was there. Very formal and serious. He barely looked me in the eye."

Ranboo realized with a sinking stomach that he himself hadn't seen Technoblade for ages. The last time he remembered he did, it was from afar as he was aimlessly staring out of a window in Eret's palace.

"So that's it?" Sapnap cast an incredulous glare towards the statue, probably wishing the piglin really was trapped in the stone shell so he could reach out and throttle him—and give him a few, painful burns while he was at it too. "He just got up and left without saying anything to anyone? No card, no message? Just nothing?"

Nothing, except an elusive statue of himself. A cold, dead reminder of the one who was once a warm, living friend.

"He doesn't do well with goodbyes," Niki tried to argue, but Sapnap was clearly having none of it.

"Well it's simple: he shouldn't have left! Problem solved!"

"There *must* be a reason."

"Yes, there's probably a reason, but it's not good enough to explain away the fact that he left without a word!"

Sapnap's retorts were twisted and blazing with rage, but Ranboo didn't flinch. Beneath it all, he could see the melancholy, the confusion, and maybe even a hint of betrayal. The hybrid felt a similar dagger trying to hack away at his heart and lungs.

Niki approached the statue and like Sapnap had done, placed her hand on it. Ranboo watched as her fingers dug themselves into the grooves and fine lines that made up the fur and clothes' material. It was astonishing how much detail had gone into its carving. Everything about it seemed far too realistic, as if the cloak was going to billow in the wind, as if the eyes were going to blink, as if the whole thing was going to spring to life, shake off its granite shroud and greet them warmly.

But just as Sapnap had confirmed it wouldn't, it never did.

"Is this what he's been doing alone all this time?" Niki asked, turning back to them all. "Did he stop us from coming to the Commune for this?"

"It couldn't have been the only reason." Ranboo had to try and think through all of this logically, but his mind was coming up empty. "It can't have been..."

Sapnap let out a low growl. Smoke curled out of his mouth and ears. "So he's been sculpting this for ages. He's been planning to leave forever and he still didn't tell us!"

"We don't know that for sure."

"I think it's pretty obvious!"

"You're jumping to conclusions, Sapnap," Niki warned him.

The fireborn snapped his head around, his veins burning brighter than ever. "What's it to you?"

"It's a bad thing to do, especially right now."

"Oh, well excuse me for trying to explain why one of our friends mysteriously disappeared without a word—"

"Everyone shut up!" Ranboo yelled, finally bringing his foot down.

To his surprise, both Niki and Sapnap turned to him and even more surprisingly, obeyed. They listened. More people seemed to be doing that in the last few years. Maybe it was because Ranboo was no longer the child he once was. Maybe it was because he had managed to finally find a way to speak clearly, mediate tense situations and let go of his anxiety to a certain degree. Or maybe it was because, right now, a fierce shiver was running all throughout his body and was impossible for any outside eye to ignore. Acid tears began to prick at the corners of his eyes, and he tried desperately to blink them away before they fell.

"There's no point in fighting. All we know is that Technoblade is gone, and we don't know where to. End of story." He wished it didn't have to be. He didn't blame Sapnap for lashing out, as he was very close to doing the same. He took a shaky breath. "The last message he's given us is this statue. We don't know what it means and we don't even know if it was even meant for us to see, but it's all we have left."

Niki looked at the mountain top around them. "But why here?"

They all knew full well. Ranboo's gaze wandered from the statue to the protruding stone lying not far from it. The marker had since sunk into the snow, and years had shrouded it in layers of ice and frost. The burial ground itself might have been left to the mercy of Time, but the man buried there was constantly ingrained into their minds. He would be for a long while yet. What remained of the Syndicate had vowed to make sure of that, but it appeared that Technoblade had gone a whole step further. Now there was

something of a stable headstone, an eternal stone effigy to guard the tomb that the actual gravestone had failed to do. A final present to a dear friend, and a final attempt at giving him something akin to the world he had always dearly promised.

Perhaps the statue was even the sign of an acceptance that Ranboo had been wishing desperately Techno would come around to in time. It was one that he probably had to get onto as well now, not for Philza anymore but for their piglin friend himself. They all did.

Technoblade was certainly not a domesticated piglin by any means. He was a warrior, a legend known the world over. He wasn't bound senselessly to the SMP like many others were. He was free to roam, to come and go as he pleased. He had his reasons—whether his friends would understand them or not—and none of them could dispute it.

That didn't mean that it didn't hurt. A *lot*.

It hurt when Eret first told him about what he had seen when he visited the tundra.

It hurt when Ranboo sent Niki and Sapnap a message so they could investigate together.

It hurt when they found the statue.

It even hurt when they left. The grief was heavy, constantly replenishing as fragments were left behind and pressed into their footsteps.

They climbed back down the mountain pass in silence. Everything that had to be said was said and anything that wasn't simply wasn't important enough to be.

Their once inhabited, beloved corner of the tundra had never looked so desolate. The small collection of spruce and cobblestone cabins that was known as the Antarctic Commune was now no more than a crumbling, eerie ghost town. Ranboo's drafty little shack pieced together in the shadow of a rocky ledge had long succumbed to the elements. The only bits of it that still stood somewhat strong were a couple of oak planks hammered into the stone. Uneven garlands of icicles hung from them like rows of sharp teeth. The main two cabins that had once housed the Blade and the Angel of Death had not been spared either. Their roofs had collapsed, snow-covered debris barricaded the steps to the passerelle between the two homes and their doorways, and their stone foundations had sunken down into the earth and had begun to crack. Even Carl's old stable and the dogs' kennels had been destroyed over time, their animals gone entirely. Carl had been gone a few

years now, shot after sustaining a broken leg in the battle against Dream, but not the dogs. Technoblade had probably set them all free. He released the last few souls trapped in the Commune until he was the last one there, and then he had left.

The small, homely oasis in the tundra had moved on. There was nothing left there for anyone anymore—except for one thing, one place only those involved knew about.

Perhaps Ranboo, Niki and Sapnap had all expected one another to make their way back home to the mainland after the fact. As it turned out, neither of them even looked at the Nether portal. In one, quiet movement, they all instead headed towards a hidden entrance buried deep beneath the white landscape. Sapnap melted the snow and heaved the rusting trapdoor open. All three of them made their way down the ladder and into the underground room that had been left dormant for half a decade now.

Ever since Philza died, no one had the heart to venture down there again. There had been no reason to, anyhow, with peace slowly but surely rooting itself back in the land. They were only visiting the Syndicate's meeting room for nostalgia's sake.

The humid stone steps and walls got slimier the further they went down. Before long, the rough earth gave away into smooth, polished bricks that formed a pattern of arches and pillars running the whole way around the room. When they reached the bottom of the staircase, they all stopped.

Everything was just as they had left it, albeit it all now covered by a thick layer of dust and grime. The strange green and white table—that Ranboo was still ninety percent sure was an ancient voodoo relic of some sort—still took pride of place in the center of the room, surrounded by the very same high-backed chairs they had all sat at numerous times. The potted wither rose was standing, motionless, in its plant pot directly underneath the soul sand lantern. The flame was still burning brightly years later, even when all the other torches mounted on the walls behind the arches had been doused, draping all of their surroundings in shadows.

Ranboo watched the lantern for a while, entranced by its beauty as well as astounded at its resilience against the endless pulses of Time's power. He took a couple of steps forwards, briefly looking up to avoid one of the many low-hanging chains. He reached up to touch it gingerly, almost in fear of having it disintegrate against his fingertips. As he backed away, his hip knocked the edge of the table and he caught himself on the armrest of one of the chairs. He glanced at the name carved into the back.

Zephyrus.

He took his hand off Philza's old chair and stepped back. He gazed out across the rest of the seats. Niki had found and sat down in hers on the opposite side, topped with the name Nemesis. The one next to her was Lethe's place; Ranboo's. Sapnap sat next to Phil's, his oilskin glove mindlessly tracing the name Herostratus above his head. There were two more unoccupied seats at the Syndicate's table. They sat alone on opposite ends. The first one—bearing the name Protesilaus—was Technoblade's. The second one was Sam's, engraved with his honorary name: Daedalus.

Ranboo made his way around the table and sat down. It was odd to see only half of the seats filled. It was odd to sit two minutes in the Syndicate room without someone commencing a meeting. It was odd to not have to use their secret names.

They said nothing for a while, simply sitting down and looking around. The chime of distant memories and phantoms drifted through the humid air, rattling the hanging chains and only briefly disturbing the lantern's flame. Then, Sapnap got up.

He left his seat and went over to the back of the room where multiple chests sat. They were the ones that contained extra armour, weapons and supplies in case one of their members was in dire need. He rummaged around for a minute or two and to Ranboo's surprise, returned to them with a bottle and three copper cups.

Niki raised an eyebrow. "How did you know that was in there?"

"How do you think? I'm the one who put it there." He uncorked the bottle and smelled it. The sharp, sweet scent of spiced wine filled the air. He checked the contents. "Although someone definitely found it already. It's already half empty."

He passed them each a cup, even though they were seemingly uncleaned. Ranboo found a black feather in his, stuck to a couple of the herbs that were still stubbornly clinging to the bottom.

Niki sniffed the outside of hers. "Gunpowder."

Sapnap picked up the third container and inspected the slight dents pressed into the copper. "Tusk marks."

They all shared a look. Despite themselves, small smiles began to tug at their sullen expressions and before long, they were laughing.

"Oh man," Sapnap chuckled, wiping a tear away and starting to pour the drink, "if either of them were still around, I'd let them have it."

"Drinking without us?" Niki teased. "How rude of them!"

Ranboo took out his memory book and his pencil. "Meeting notes: write Zephyrus, Daedalus and Protesilaus a strongly-worded complaint letter," he jotted down playfully, reading it out loud as he did.

The three of them fell into hysterics once again. The alcohol still hadn't been touched. Ranboo was the first to stop, but his smile still remained. Their silly little joke and laughs that came with it proved to him that whatever happened, it wasn't the end of the world. They could still keep part of their little settlement alive with joy instead of commemorative sadness.

Sapnap held up his cup and invited his friends to stand. "I propose a toast." He held his drink up to the lantern's flame. "Here's to us."

"Here's to the Syndicate," Niki said, joining him a moment later.

Ranboo could feel both of their gazes land on him, expectant. His lips were dry and his voice stuck in his throat.

He looked at each of the empty seats in turn. Philza was dead, Sam and Techno had left. Out of the three that remained, one was a leader, the other a baker, and the third a royal advisor. It was quite a motley crew, but Ranboo wouldn't trade them for the world. Even those who had disappeared had forever tied a scrap of their souls to their noble places in the Syndicate, and thus to those that remained.

He raised his cup. "To our friends, wherever they may be."

"To our friends."

Echoes of "cheers" filled the room as they each knocked their drinks together and took a collective sip. The wine was indeed strong and sweet, even sickly so, and Ranboo felt his senses and sane thoughts momentarily get overpowered by a rich curtain of exotic sweetness.

He was never a big drinker—the thought of his mind getting even more messed up than it already was was unfathomable—but tasting the wine there, he could certainly see why others were. He also had to note the irony of it all: the Syndicate, even miles, years, lives and dimensions apart, had finished one last bottle together. Their last successful venture as a group had paid off.

Ranboo was the first to finish his wine, which might have been a mistake. As soon as he put his cup down, a hiccup climbed its way up his throat and out

of his mouth. His ears and tail twitched with every spasm, and he forced himself back down into his chair.

"Look at that, young Lethe can't hold his alcohol," Sarnap teased. He eased himself into his seat and kicked his feet up onto the table. "That's going to be a problem at the afterparty. Might want to lay off it."

"Or maybe that'll be a good thing," Niki hummed, hiding a painfully obvious smirk behind the rim of her cup. "He'll be the only sober one to stop you from burning Kinoko down again."

"Ha, ha, very funny," the fireborn tutted. He took off one of his gloves and snapped his fingers, sending a tiny fireball in the baker's general direction.

She dodged it with ease and rolled her eyes when it hit the wall. "See what I mean?" she sighed, looking at Ranboo. "We need someone to keep this one in check."

"Unfortunately, Niki, no can—*hic*—do. He'll be Karl's responsibility soon enough, and we'll finally be free."

"Free from Sarnap? Now that'll be the day..."

Sarnap pointed a burning, warning finger at them both. "Keep that up and I'll reconsider your positions in our witness retinue."

Ranboo knew that he wouldn't. Sarnap wasn't like that. He could tease, he could push the limits, but he rarely acted on any of his threats. They were empty, for the most part. Anyway, the hybrid could see the pure joy dancing behind his bright, sparkling eyes. Almost nothing could dampen his excitement.

"How many weeks left?" Ranboo checked, flipping back through his memory book in sudden doubt.

Sarnap smiled widely. "One week, three days and sixteen hours exactly," he replied. "That will give us the time to clear up the debris around Kinoko. I'm not going to lie, I thought we were going to have to push the date back by a month or two if the storm didn't stop when it did."

"Rainy weddings can be romantic," Niki pointed out.

Immediately, both the fireborn and the enderman hybrid—each as sensitive to water as the other—shook their heads.

"I'd like to live to see the altar, thank you very much," Sarnap sniffed.

"Good point. Have you put in the food order yet, or did you change your mind?"

"Sent the list off the Velvet this very morning. Why, did you think I'd go to someone else? Do you really have so little faith in me, Niki?"

"You could say that, yes," she scoffed. "After all, our cakes are delicious. You'd be a fool not to commission us on your special day. We only make the best for our dearest friends."

Despite all their almost constant bickering and past animosity, Ranboo could tell that there was strong affection between Niki and Sapnap. It hadn't wavered in the years since. The softness that dulled the hard bite of her words and the genuine, warm smiles that graced his face seemed to prove it.

The fireborn leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. "Ten days," he sighed, more to himself than anything. "After a five year long engagement, I can still wait ten more days..."

Ranboo couldn't help but share his excitement. Ten more days until another one of his friends got their happy ending. It was only a matter of time and with nationwide peace still very much in place, everyone would be allowed the life they deserved. It was one of the many things that marked the new era of the SMP with so many uplifted spirits.

The royal Kinoko wedding was one of the many celebrations people could now look forward to with no alarm bells ringing in the background.

Nothing could go wrong anymore.

Chapter Two: Ocean's Thunder

It had been said for years and years that there was a stark difference between sailors and pirates. Sailors told the stories that pirates created and lived through. They passed on the fantastical retellings of their dastardly deeds, both frightening and amazing others while they hauled cargo, rowed boats, and wasted away on endless, unexciting voyages. Pirates were legends. Sailors were left to loiter in their shadow and keep their heads down for fear of losing them. Pirates, many said, had all the fun and the sailors all the hard work.

However, they also failed to mention that pirates were wanted. They were chased across the seas, brought into ports and hung with no mercy. They were violent, selfish and brutish creatures, and no amount of supernatural marine discoveries or well-weaved myths had ever persuaded anyone to spare any of them, or at least very few.

The sailors in the Captain's crew may have looked like pirates at first glance—with peg-legs, eyepatches and scarred skin to match their strength and inhuman resilience to anything and everything—but that couldn't have been further from the truth. They all made sure of that.

They made a name for themselves on the high seas through good deeds and fearless exploration. They saved treasure troves instead of pillaging them. They spent months sailing into uncharted waters of the Old World in search of signs of the lost city of Atlantis for curiosity's sake rather than for the untold power they could find within it. The coastal towns and kingdoms they stopped by were left unscathed. They still attacked other vessels, but only in self-defence or in order to protect merchant ships from meeting a watery grave by the ruthless cannon fire of outlawed scallywags.

"Guardians of the Endless Oceans", folk called the sight of their galleon and the talented crew who manned it. Five years had their presence graced the waves, and those five years had proven fruitful. Families and rulers alike blessed their brave sailors with the promise that if they crossed paths with them, they'd be in fortune's favours, all while pirates feared and scorned their very mention with just as much passion.

"Beware ye the blue flag of the Guardians," they'd warn to their dastardly shipmates, "for t'will be the last thing ye ship will see."

Perhaps that was a little dramatic. The Captain and her crew tried desperately not to senselessly drown unsuspecting victims. After all, true good and courage was not to know when to kill, but rather when to spare a life. They strived to keep their slates and blades clean of blood.

Gods knew that the Captain and her first mate were sick of the stuff.

The Captain and her first mate.

The Lightning and the Thunder.

She was the Lightning, swift and agile with the fastest and sharpest blade in the thousand seas. He was the Thunder, the first mate who knew how to wield a trident as well as Poseidon himself and in battle filled the air with rumbling, crackling clouds of gunpowder.

There had rarely been a time in History where two names shared the fame usually attributed to a single captain, and yet it seemed impossible to fathom splitting their two stories apart. The Lightning and the Thunder were either spoken of together, or not at all.

But underneath all the names and reputations and legends, they were no different to many of the souls they rescued. They had been through hellscapes unlike anything the brine could ever claim to create. They had come out the other side of the tunnel a little bruised, some parts heavily broken, but alive. They only wished to help others do the same.

"Land ahoy! Straight ahead!"

Immediately, the first mate's head snapped up. He rushed away from the maps strewn across the desk, abandoning his quill in the process, and bolted out of the cabin. The day had been bright blue for the most part, with a stiff wind that generously filled the sails and set them on a speedy course across the brine. However, as the land in question grew closer, so did the bleak sky hanging over it and the thick mist shrouding the rocky outcrops and jagged obstacles jutting out from the water below. The air too seemed to have changed, and the breeze was suddenly weighed down by a pressure heavy with dread and uneasiness. A void-like cavern entrance, like a conspicuous black spot of ink, beckoned them forwards.

He had never seen the place for himself, but he had heard enough stories to recognize it immediately.

Melody's Pass.

They were closing in fast. Sam immediately leapt into action.

"Remember the Captain's orders!" he yelled to the crew, rushing across the deck and to help them with the final checks. "Pull in the cannons, lock the brig and lower the topsails!"

Obedient echoes of "aye, sir" followed his words in a loud, slurred mass. The mist was closing in by the second. There was no time to waste. Sam doubled back briefly to rid himself of his jacket and trident, leaving them in the cabin and firmly shutting the door. Jittery with nerves, he grabbed a nearby length of rope and went over to the main mast. He looped it around a couple of times, making sure it was secure.

"Pa, what are you doing?"

A young piglin, no older than ten, pushed herself away from the barrel of beeswax where the rest of the crewmates were scooping out small lumps

and fashioning themselves pairs of earplugs and came to join him, her head tilted quizzically to the side.

Sam smiled. "What does it look like?"

"I thought—"

"Michelle, sweetheart, please. I need some help."

He gazed imploringly at his daughter, who eventually sighed and gave in. She trotted closer and he let her bind his wrists with the remaining length of the rope. She did so in silence, rolling her amber eye when he thanked her and readjusting her eye-patch.

"Ma's going to kill you," she warned him, trying to tighten the knot with her clumsy trotters.

Sam laughed, "Maybe."

"You're not dragging me down with you."

"I wouldn't dream of it, princess."

He briefly pulled one of his hands away and cupped her cheek, leaning down to press a gentle kiss against her forehead. Michelle reached up on her tippy-toes and grunted happily.

"I agree with Ma," she admitted, coming back down, "this is crazy."

"Oh, undoubtedly."

"I'm not coming to your funeral."

"Understood." He was still smiling. "I promise you and Ma that I'll be completely safe."

"You can tell her now." Michelle gestured to a spot behind the helm where a figure had suddenly appeared, before smirking and going off to sit on a nearby keg to watch the show unfold.

Rapid hoofsteps pounded against wood as the Captain galloped down the steps of the quarterdeck, catching herself on the railing with one hand as she brushed the enderpearl particles off her gilded, navy blue uniform with the other. Her brown and white curls were tied into a thick braid that ran halfway down her back, the last few looser locks caught in the feathered tricorn perched on her head. She carried herself with confidence and dignity worthy

of the fiercest of naval commanders. Despite her short stature and soft features, she proved to be the biggest and brightest presence this side of the ocean's current. She always was.

That's my girl.

"The merchant ships have been warned and prepared," she bellowed to her crew in a loud, clear voice that immediately dulled all of the noises around them. "Get ready to turn into the pass!"

Her shining blue eyes surveyed the scene before her with a stern air of command that one couldn't help but admire greatly. Sam certainly did. He always had.

Eventually, her gaze landed on him and immediately, her captain's demeanour softened. For a second or two. It was back the instant she saw the rope loosely tied around his wrists.

"Sam, no."

"Puffy, yes."

She strode over and made to grab him. "We've talked about this, and the answer is no. It's too dangerous."

He teasingly held his hands out of reach, watching in amusement as she tried to spring up and yank him down. "I've read up on the whole thing. I'll be fine."

"Reading 'The Odyssey' isn't what I'd call intricate research."

"But Antfrost's notes definitely are." To further prove his point, he dug out the papers in question from his back pocket and handed them to her.

"I told you she wouldn't like it," Michelle reminded him in a sing-song voice.

"And I thought I told you to prepare yourself, young lady," Puffy tutted, turning towards their daughter.

"I did."

"Well if you can still hear me, then you certainly haven't. Get the earplugs and stay close to the cabin. Have you taken any Water Resistance yet?"

She threw her head back and pouted. "Do I *have* to?"

"Yes, you absolutely do."

"It tastes like grass..."

"Well I'm sorry, but I don't want my little girl burning to death in the brine. Nether creature or not, I would have made you take it."

"*Ma...*"

"Now, sweetheart. Meanwhile, I'll be having a serious conversation with your father."

Michelle rolled her eyes and sulked off, uncapping a vial from her pocket. Sam tried desperately to hide his smile and his laugh.

"Sam, it's not funny."

"Certainly not, m'am." He cleared his throat and attempted to push down any sign of clear amusement. "So, anyways, Antfrost's research."

Puffy skimmed the papers briefly and sighed, folding her arms across her chest. "This doesn't make it any less dangerous."

"I know."

"You could get killed."

"I know."

"You're on your last life."

"Puffy, my darling, I *know*."

"I don't think you do. These sirens are more than pieces of fiction and snippets of research. They're real."

"Just like every other sea myth we've uncovered," Sam pointed out. "I'll be fine. I know what I'm doing. Trust me. I just need you to trust me. If you don't, then I'll stop all of this, alright? I will, truly."

"I..."

"Puffy, do you trust me?"

The captain stared deeply into his eyes, letting him glimpse all the love and all the fear in them. "You know I do, Sammy. I'm just worried."

He knew she was. He could tell from the way her right hoof began to repeatedly tap against the deck. He held out his half-binded hands and gave her an encouraging smile. She folded. Captain Puffy got to work tying his hands up properly this time. She wasn't gentle about it. As she worked, she talked.

"Now remember, you'll be able to hear their song but whatever you do, resist them. You have to."

"I will."

"You're saying that but you're strong, Sam. You could probably break these binds if you really tried." She paused her work for a moment, looked at it, then looped the string around his wrists a couple more times. "Because of that, the crew will have explicit permission to knock you out if you so much as fray the rope. Understood?"

"Understood, Captain." He let his eyes wander up from their hands to her face, watching her every movement. Every worried crease in her forehead, every twitch of her sheep-like ears, even the deep scar that ran cut up her jaw was entrancing to him. "Even when you're concerned for me, you're absolutely beautiful. You're more radiant with every day that goes by."

"Flattery gets you nowhere," she huffed, although Sam was pleased and amused to see a deep blush colour her cheeks. She tightened the knot and yanked him closer to her. "I'd say you look pretty good tied up, actually. Keeps you out of trouble."

"Are you calling me reckless?"

"Maybe I am."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you liked it."

"Maybe I do—to a certain degree."

Puffy released him from her grasp a moment later and took the small balls of earwax offered to her by one of their shipmates. Still watching him, she pressed them into her ears and checked the knots one last time. After a moment of hesitation, she gave him a gentle headbutt. He closed his eyes, pressing her forehead against hers for a single moment. It was such a small thing, but it gave him all the courage in the world and more besides.

"Good luck," she murmured.

She eventually walked off, taking control of the helm and expertly sailing the galleon between the rocky outcrops. Behind them, the three merchant ships they were currently escorting to their respective destinations followed suit without breaking their perfectly lined formation. The straight cuts they left in the brine rippled away without leaving so much as a trace behind.

Sam wanted to say something more, but knew full well that it would be pointless. With everyone deafened to any and all outside noises and each engrossed in their duties, he was in his own isolated little world. He could scream and no one would hear. He was breathing, seeing and living alone in a world of silence.

The sun's rays were gradually fading away, slowly hidden by the grey fog that coated Melody's Pass and concealed it from the rest of the sea. The closer they got, the warmer the air seemed to become. The wind had stopped, instead making way for a heatwave much like those that hung around the warmer coasts and suffocated the fauna and flora in their steamy jungles. He raised his eyes to the heavens, sweat already trickling down his neck and chest, and watched the sky all but disappear from view as the black, slimy rocks arched overhead. The water below the ship had started to glow with green tones in the almost absolute darkness, casting a haunting, ghostly light over the shattered remains of the less fortunate vessels that had travelled through long before them.

The pass was like a graveyard of sorts. A narrow, watery graveyard for so many unfortunate souls, the only fragments remaining of them being the rotting wooden hulls, mutilated figureheads and torn sails of their ships. They were the only things akin to headstones that they'd ever get. It was a truly tragic scene, and it made Sam's hair stand on edge.

And to think that it was nothing but a song that had dragged them down. A song sung by heavenly and haunting creatures who lured sailors to their dooms with nothing but their voice and stolen words.

It was a morbid curiosity that had made Sam want to hear them so badly. He had found his sea legs, and he wanted to use them to their fullest. He wanted to experience every single opportunity the ocean had to offer. Hearing the sirens' song was one of the last ones on his list. The fact that their journey was to take them through Melody's Pass was too perfect an opportunity to ignore.

The hull lightly scraped against a boulder hidden beneath the waves, suddenly jolting everyone on board. The wooden knock resonated with an eerie echo, weaving its drawn-out sigh through every nook and cranny until the vaulted ceiling was ringing.

That was when Sam saw it.

Something moved on a rocky outcrop along one of the walls. A shadow grew against the green shine of the water, then shrank down to the size of the figure that finally emerged.

Sam took a small step forward to get a better look. Blades were drawn all around him. He hadn't even strained the rope yet. The rest of the crew were all simply far too on edge to care. He ignored them.

The siren, perhaps a head or two smaller than himself, lost in the sea of dark rock it was perched on captured any and all of his attention. Accounts had differed greatly over the years, but Sam was pleased to find that Antfrost's own sketches had proven to be the most accurate.

He had expected a flock of them to have descended upon the boat and hum in his ears, as Homer had depicted in his poems. Instead, there was only one who had emerged—female, he guessed from appearance alone.

Wet auburn braids cascaded down her back, glistening with a dark sheen that matched the copper glints of her feathers. They covered the entirety of her lower body in a shining metallic mosaic. Parts of her plumage were gone, plucked and sliced away by the frantically swinging blades of those she had seduced and conquered. Her skin shone with an otherworldly, milky white glow, as if she was one of the many deceased souls that now languished eternally on the seabed. Only her eyes seemed to still retain roots in the real world, as black as coal and the night sky combined. It was a stare so dark and piercing that it tore right through Sam's own. Her wings raised above her head, wafting a sweet scent the sailors' ways.

The ship swerved around another rock and began to bob along the length of the wall. Soon, there was only a thin strip of water between them. The siren slid closer, her terrible, enchanting gaze never wavering. She seemed to be just as morbidly infatuated with Sam as he was with her. The hull hit the slimy tip of a broken, seaweed-covered mast. Its dry knock once again filled the pass and on that dull, deep note, the siren began to sing.

And for the first time in ages, Sam felt well and truly powerless. He was glad for the ropes that tied him to the mast. In all his years, he had never heard a sweeter, more alluring tune than the one which now poured from the creature's scarlet lips.

Every note seemed to be perfectly sung, and yet each one so hauntingly out of place. The words were jumbled and pieced together from an unfathomable number of different languages both modern and ancient, and yet he somehow understood every single one. The story it told drifted its way

straight into his heart, soul and every nerve in his body, filling his entire being with warm, intoxicating chills that didn't skitter or crawl, but danced under his skin. It was so tooth-rottingly sweet, so eye-wateringly beautiful, so ethereal and phantom-like. He no longer knew where he ended and where the enchantment of the siren's melody began. He could feel himself slipping away by the minute. He tried to resist, and yet it was impossible.

She was calling to him, begging him to come to her, to succumb. The only thing that still stopped him from doing so were the shackles that rubbed against his wrists, the raw pain only just keeping him from buckling completely. Otherwise, he was powerless. Completely and utterly powerless over his own body, his mind and his awakened desires.

Normally, he would hate the feeling. But after relinquishing complete control to the song, he couldn't hate anymore nor love or feel anything else. He couldn't think anymore. All his body and mind wanted to do was obey. Obey her. For someone who always seemed so in control, the fall would be painful, and hard. Invisible strings were tied to him, desperately trying to pull him over the edge. The sturdy ropes around his wrists kept him firmly in place.

The ship beneath his feet was starting to move away, and for a moment, Sam snapped out of the trance as the music faded out of earshot. He thought that he had done it, that the worst had passed.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

Something soared over the quarterdeck and landed with a light *thunk!* on the deck below, sparking strangled shouts of alarm from the rest of the crew. Sam's heart leapt into his throat. The siren made her way towards him, as blind to the rest of the world as he was in that moment. Her attention was focused on him and him alone, the only one who deigned to hear her song.

As the melody slithered closer and closer, Sam felt himself slipping further and further away from sane consciousness.

Before he knew it, the inky black eyes of the creature were level with his own. He didn't dare breathe as the siren's hand caressed up his chest, over his collarbone and came up to rest on the side of his neck, her sharp, claw-like nails sinking into his skin and the crimson fabric of his bandana. Her song continued to flow from her mouth and into the depths of his soul, clawing at every inch of him in one final attempt to claim him for the collection of ghosts haunting the darkened pass.

As it did, he could just about feel the rope around his hands start to loosen. The siren's touch was featherlight, almost impossible to discern. No one could have ever realized she was undoing the knots until it was too late.

Someone leapt into the scene, tearing the creature off Sam. The siren shrieked and thrashed around, narrowly avoiding the furious flails of a silver cutlass that almost cut her wings clean off. The once beautiful voice and melody it produced now showed its real colours in an orchestra of shrieks and ear-piercing screeches of fury. The siren had some trouble rising back into the air. As a parting gift she slashed the cheek of her attacker with her talons. The world abruptly turned lighter as the galleon sailed out of the other side of Melody's Pass, and the sun's rays greeted the ships warmly.

The curse broke. Sam stumbled backwards and crumbled against the mast.

In a flash, Puffy sheathed her sword and knelt down by his side. "Sam! Are you alright? Are you there? Answer me!"

Sam finally realized how utterly drained his body was and the mental subspace he had sunk into shattered into the most painful, head-splitting headache he had ever had. It felt like someone was painstakingly shoving glass shards into his head. It was agony, and yet it was intoxicating. Almost as intoxicating as the chant was. He relished in it.

He threw his head back against the wood of the mast and he began to laugh himself silly. He laughed in relief as fear's adrenaline died down. He laughed just because he could. Everyone must have thought he was going crazy.

"My gods," he sighed, beaming despite himself, "that was incredible!"

"Incredibly dangerous, you mean!" The captain made him face her, her hands on his shoulders. "You could have gotten yourself killed! That was a ridiculously close call! Are you hurt?"

"My wrists are sore and I feel like someone accidentally took a sledgehammer to my head, but other than that I'm fine. Thank you for letting me do that. It was... I... I don't even know what to say anymore..."

She leaned in and pressed a tender kiss to the top of his head. She then promptly punched him in the gut.

"*That* is what you get for not listening to the Captain's advice."

Twilight rolled around not long after all four ships safely sailed through and out of Melody's Pass, and soon after that, nighttime fell. It was one of the rare moments that sailors could get any rest, as the ocean was one of the rare forces that was often generous during the witching hours. The winds outside on the deck were cold but the brig was warm, and so the crew made

the most of it. They all dined, drank and spent the evening in good company, joking and telling stories.

Only Sam didn't show up.

His sore wrists had been slathered in ointment and bandaged, but his aching head still hadn't stopped. The siren's song still pestered him relentlessly. He needed air. He decided to spend some time alone up by the wheel.

He had tried to occupy himself by working on some of the quick drawings he had sketched up on their journey to the Old World. Once revered landmarks had been left to rot as the civilisations brought about their own distraction, and now only ruins remained of most of them. The crew onboard The Guardian had been some of the lucky souls to embark on the journey to see them. Puffy had always dreamed of doing so. Sam did everything he could to make sure her dream was realized. He was currently refining the pictures of the marvellous, ruined buildings gathered in what they had assumed was once a major, landlocked capital. Sam especially was in awe of the architecture. They included, among others, a ridiculously tall iron tower topped with a bent spire; a place of worship built entirely from blinding white limestone; an arc of triumph depicting battles and victories long since forgotten to Time; and a scarlet windmill oddly out of place in the center of a crumbling, greystone boulevard. It was while shading the latter with dark crimson that his headache acted up again.

It screamed at him to stop any and all intellectually stimulating endeavours. He gave up and closed the journal. Even fiddling with a small redstone gadget was out of the question in his current state. His mind only wished for one thing—to be allowed to rest.

So he did nothing.

He leaned against the railings of the quarterdeck, staring up at the sky, and when his neck began to hurt, he instead took something else out from his pocket and turned his attention to the small golden token he constantly kept on him.

He had been carrying it around for one, maybe two years now, and he was still the only one to know about it. It was small and shining, fashioned by his own hand by expertly twisting and weaving thin strands of metal between each other. They held in place a small, sapphire gem.

He had built prisons, cannons and a staggering number of other creations that seemed to defy and and all laws of comprehension. But this token was perhaps his finest piece. He promised himself it always would be. He often looked at it when he was alone, lost in thought.

A day would come where he would finally do what he was meaning to do with it, and finally cross off the last item on his list. It was probably the most daunting one of them all.

One day, he'd work up the courage.

One day, or one night.

When the time was right.

"Sam?"

It wouldn't be tonight.

He pocketed the ring as quickly as he could and feigned to be watching the waves in their dark ballet. He cleared his throat and turned to the newcomer.

Puffy reached the top step of the staircase, carrying two tankards with her. Her uniform and commanding facade were put to rest for the night. Everything about her seemed softer and gentler, from her gaze to her smile.

She held up one of the flagons. "I thought that maybe a bit of rum would help dull the migraine a little."

Sam smiled back and invited her closer. He took the drink offered to him and turned back to the ocean. Immediately the alcohol shot clean through him, warming him from head to toe against the bitter evening wind.

Puffy fiddled with the ribbon tying her braid back and fed her fingers through to free her hair. Bouncy curls cascaded over her shoulders and down her back, and she tucked a small lock behind one of her ears. She then settled beside him, leaning against the railings just as he was with their elbows almost touching. They stayed like that for a good while, drinking together in a comfortable, uninterrupted quiet and losing themselves to the lapping waves and muffled music of the festive gathering below deck.

Eventually, once their flagons had been discarded on the ground, he snuck a look across to her. His stomach plummeted when he saw her nurse her cheek.

She caught him looking. "It's just a scratch," she reassured him, showing him the three fine talon tracks that had lightly cut open her skin. "They'll heal in a few days."

That didn't stop his stomach from churning like the ocean waves. "I'm sorry, I should have listened to you about the pass. I never wanted you to get hurt."

"Hey, it's fine, really. I can now say that I've kicked a siren's feathered ass and oh boy—that felt *good*!"

"You were astounding."

"I know, I know, but keep the praise coming. I like it."

They burst into a soft fit of laughter.

"No one tries to seduce my first mate and gets away with it," Puffy hummed, her head held high.

"Oh, so you were only worried that she'd make me quit my position," Sam teased her playfully. "Not because you were a little jealous and protective of me in any other way?"

"Other way?"

"You know what I mean, *darling*." He purred out the pet-name and gazed at her with teasing, half-lidded eyes.

She mirrored him. "Well, there was definitely a little jealousy involved on that front, yes..."

"Darling, the last thing I would do is leave you, least of all for a siren with a nice voice."

"That defence reassures me up to the point that you realize that their enchantment doesn't really give their victims much of a choice in the matter." Puffy's head came to rest against his shoulder. "Which song was it?"

"The song?"

"The one the siren sang."

He thought for a moment. "I can't really remember the words so much as the melody, but I think it was something to do with sailors leaving, fair maidens and Cupid's bow, or something like that."

"Ah, I see."

"You know it?"

"It's an old sea shanty." She began to hum it, matching the tune that had been stuck in his head ever since the pass. "Legend says that sirens sing it

to the sailors they find particularly attractive, to try and seduce them through their egos by promising them their undying devotion."

"So that siren was essentially trying to flirt with me?"

"Most likely, yes."

"Well unfortunately for her, a striking beauty has already given me her heart." He lowered his voice to a purr, leaning in closer to her until they were only about a hair's breadth away from each other's lips. "And I would *never* dream of ever wanting another, no matter how tempting. I'm yours and only yours..."

Their embrace was tender and warm, banishing the last dregs of cold briney air from their bodies. He held her against him, continuing to kiss her gently and lightly. The last remnants of the siren's tune evaporated completely from his mind, replaced instead by the unwavering adoration that he always held so dearly towards the captain.

His captain.

No enchanting melody could make his heart and soul sing louder and more beautifully than the way simply holding his beloved could. He suddenly spun them around until she had both hands on the railings and he was pressed against her back. She laughed and playfully swiped at him as he left a few quick pecks on her cheek, then sighed contently when he wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his chin on the top of her head.

"Short and soft," he teased lightly.

"Tall and reckless," she replied in the same tone, ending with a content hum as his body heat began to warm them both up.

Her hand dove into his jacket pocket. She took out the sketch journal and began mindlessly flipping through it. She stopped when she came to the red windmill, silently staring at it for a few minutes.

"It seems silly," she admitted, "but it reminds me of Snowchester."

Sam peeked down at the book and hummed. "Me too..."

"I... find myself missing it, sometimes." She looked up at him. "Does that sound weird? I actually *miss* the life we had on land. I shouldn't because the sea was what called me back, but I do and I can't explain it. Is it weird that I want it back, in a way? Maybe not the exact same one but something similar.

Would that be betraying the ocean and everything I am, though? Would it? I mean, my son stayed behind, and I—"

"Puffy, breathe." Sam caught her face between his hands and smiled. "It's okay to miss things. I do too. I miss our life back then, and I miss the people that were in it. I always will. But we still write to Ranboo, and Tubbo is well. They're not completely gone and even if they were, they'll always be right here." He placed his hand over her heart. "Right there, right next to Tommy."

Puffy's blue gaze darkened with a veil of sadness, the very same one that still occasionally came to drape Sam in a shroud of funeral-grey grief. Her hand soon joined his and he leaned forwards until their foreheads touched. They stood there silently for quite a while, memories of the young red and wild phantom whose presence still trailed them wherever they went. Sam just hoped that wherever he was now, he was alright in the five years that had passed since. He hoped that he was in a better place. Tommy deserved that, and more. He deserved to be happy. Perhaps Fran and Nook were bounding along beside him now. Maybe Philza and Wilbur were keeping him safe and warm. Sam just wanted the boy to be happy, safe and loved. That was always all he had wanted for him. Let all his grief and strife be left to those he left behind: Tommy deserved to rise above all that now, and find his own peace. There was no doubt that Puffy was feeling the exact same way.

"You alright?" Sam used his thumb to wipe away a small tear that had started to roll down her cheek.

"It just never gets any easier," she whispered hoarsely.

"I know, my darling." He kissed her forehead and held her close. "I know..."

Leaving the SMP and everything in it had felt strange and wrong at first. For the first week or so he spent on the seas, Sam was violently homesick (and seasick). He had wondered long and hard if he had made the right choice in the end. He tortured himself but in the end it was all fruitless and unnecessary worry.

His own peace was for him to take. The SMP was at peace. Everything had grown new roots and stabilized. He could choose his own life and be with who he desperately wanted to be. He followed his heart instead of his head, he wanted to stay with his dearest love. That's exactly what he had done.

He had chosen to leave, and he couldn't have been happier. A fond smile brightened his features as he pictured Michelle, below deck, undoubtedly boisterously singing with the rest of the crew or utterly entranced by one of the many stories they passed around with the kegs of rum. He was here for their daughter just as much as he was there for Puffy and himself.

Nonetheless, something still nagged at him, a sliver of doubt that despite his best attempts at blocking it always snaked its way back.

"You don't regret me tagging along, do you? I seem to attract more harm than good..."

"Oh, honey..." She turned her head slightly and kissed his palm. "How could I ever? I couldn't have wished for a better first mate—one I can trust completely and one I love more than gold, more than jewels, more than any and all treasures the universe could ever give me. I have lived through so much with you and leaving all of that happiness, that pain, that resilience in a place I'd probably never see again... It would have all felt so wrong. It feels wrong even just thinking about it."

The golden token in his pocket began to itch, and a burning question found its way out of him. It wasn't the question, but one close enough to bring a little reassurance.

"So if I decided to stay with you, you wouldn't mind?"

"What kind of question is that? Of course not!"

He looked back at the sea, trying to hide his relief. "I was just wondering."

"Did you think I would?"

"No, I just... I just needed to know for sure. I needed to hear it from someone other than my own mind. You have no idea how much you mean to me, and I don't want to lose you."

"You'll never lose me," she assured him. "If anything, I was scared that you would regret coming with us."

"How could I?"

The two of them shared a brief look and a small, exasperated scoff as they realized that both of their fears had been for nothing.

"I'll stick around," he promised suddenly and—he had to confess—needlessly. He held his hand open on the railing, palm facing the starry sky. "Always."

"And forever." Her own laid on top, interlacing their fingers.

Sam squeezed her hand tightly. He brought their bond up to his lips and kissed it gently.

"My beautiful thunder," Puffy murmured, warming his heart to no end.

He tilted her head up towards him. The feeling of her soft skin against his calloused thumb melted him even more than he ever thought was possible. Her eyes were completely and utterly alight with devotion. She was so brilliant, so bold, so... He couldn't even properly put her into words.

"My beautiful lightning..."

And for an instant, everything was perfect.

Chapter Three: The Right Hand Of The Throne

"Ah, Ranboo! Good morning!"

Ranboo bowed, closing the door behind him. "Good morning, Your M—" He stopped himself and rose. "Eret," he corrected. "Good morning, Eret. It just slipped out, I'm sorry."

"Relax, it's fine. I appreciate you trying. That's more than can be said for most of my courtiers and cabinet." The monarch pushed themselves out from their desk. "Ready to do the rounds?"

Ranboo showed off the long, waterproof boots he had put on that very morning. "Ready as I'll ever be."

Eret lifted up his skirts to reveal a strikingly similar pair on his own feet. He laughed before gently picking up and placing his crown on top of his head. It nestled perfectly in his mop of light brown curls, turning their mess into a regal bed for his circlet.

"Well then," he hummed, gesturing to the door, "shall we?"

A violent storm had hit the SMP.

It had rolled in from the tundra, hung around the mainland for three months, then moved on just as swiftly and as unexpectedly as it had come. That time was marked by almost constant heavy downpours, howling wind and thunderstorms that lasted through the night—and that was when it Had decided to act just a little tamer. Occasionally, when it seemed like everyone was hoping it was about to end, the storm picked up tenfold. Trees were uprooted, fields of crops were destroyed, roofs caved in, a few buildings were

even torn down. Lakes, ponds and rivers overflowed into the forests and onto the streets. Thick, sticky mud caked every doorstep, cobble and path. Many lost their homes.

If this particular tempest had hit some seven years ago, then it could have very well spelled the end of the SMP. With all the tension constantly crackling in the air, cooperation would have been little to impossible. Either it would have been useless to attempt to rebuild because another incident would just tear it all down again, or any favours would have been attached to strings that could have cost lives.

Thank the gods those times were over.

Now, taking care of one's nation and people no longer felt like a bittersweet chore. It actually accomplished something that would stay. Leaders could actually feel like they were doing something substantial with their power and influence, that they were doing their job well. Their people reportedly thought so too.

"Rounds" was the name King Eret of the Greater SMP had given to the unscheduled, informal diplomatic visits he paid to the neighbouring nations. He often went alone with only Ranboo for company, and they had been happening a lot recently. With the treacherous tempest finally over, the weeks of cleaning and rebuilding were in full swing.

The tightly packed structures of the Greater SMP had seemingly fared much better than most would have expected. At the worst, a roof had caved in or a window had been smashed by branches whisked up by the powerful winds. The banks of the lake on which sat the Community House junction had been flooded, but it seemed like the puddles were starting to finally soak into the earth and dry up in the sunny afternoons. Otherwise, the cleaning up process mainly consisted of brushing and scraping away the mud that slathered the doorsteps and the Prime Path, and that in of itself was a simple enough task. Most of the inhabitants had gone off to help the other realms, and so the walk through the Greater SMP was relatively quiet save for the occasional giggle of passing children or the dry brushing of a twig broom.

Ranboo took a couple of looks around him, then flipped open his memory book and wrote down: Greater SMP doing well. Most flooding damages fixed. Excess water pumped back into river. Lots of mud.

"I heard you visited the Commune," Eret suddenly said, making the hybrid jump.

He almost dropped his pen. "I—"

"You're allowed to, Ranboo, don't worry."

"No, I know, it's just..."

"You saw it, didn't you?"

It, the statue. What was left of Technoblade.

Ranboo nodded somberly. "Yeah..."

Eret replied with nothing but a hum, but slowed down and lay a comforting hand on Ranboo's back.

The monarch was in fact the first one to have seen the statue during a solo, friendly visit to the tundra, and had told Ranboo about it afterwards.

In a way, Ranboo wished he hadn't. He didn't know how he was supposed to react when his boss told him that his mentor and one of his closest friends was probably frozen in Time forever, without a goodbye. Even after the fact, as they determined that Technoblade had simply left, he still didn't know how to react.

The only entry in Ranboo's memory book from that day was the following:
Went to the Commune with Niki and Sapnap. Techno is gone. Fuck.

It was far from as long and convoluted as any of the accounts on the other pages, and yet there was something about its bluntness that sent a shockwave of detailed recognition through his mind every time he read it over. That, he would never be able to forget whether he liked it or not.

He let out a sigh, then looked askance at Eret.

Technoblade was an anarchist, but a selective one. He had chosen his dethroning victims carefully. He had analyzed their rules, their nation's sins and their people's thoughts and when he had deemed it necessary, he had taken action against them. However, Ranboo had always been humoured to find that following L'Manberg's fall, the piglin seemed lenient—even happy—with the powers and nations still in play. It was no secret to anyone that Eret had spent many pleasant afternoons simply sitting down and talking with Techno.

Ranboo couldn't blame the piglin for bonding with the king. There was simply something so utterly enchanting about Eret. Maybe it was the way he carried himself—properly for his rank but relaxed enough to shake off any hint of superiority—or how he managed to pull off every ornate silk garment so magnificently and yet modestly enough to, again, be seen as a living

breathing being before he was seen as his title. Maybe it was even how he smiled and talked in his deep, melodious tone that could soften even the coldest of hearts enough to make them listen to what he had to say. Maybe it was how he always wished the best for everything and everyone and strived for ultimate peace.

Or perhaps it was for a much darker reason. Maybe they had both bonded over their "rightful" and treacherous attacks on L'Manberg, back in the day. No one really talked about their roles in the infamous nation's fall anymore. Not after the Red Banquet and the final battle against Dream had all but erased their past mistakes in favour of a blanket of glory and the landslide of people's love that came with it. Ranboo wasn't about to bring any of it up anytime soon.

Ranboo was also one to make up his own mind about things. It was one of the many of his morals that made up his recurring mantra of "choose people, not sides". So when Eret offered him a job in the palace as a cabinet advisor and Techno gently but firmly pushed him and others away from the tundra, he had taken it up.

King Eret had not only given him a purpose and a job, but he had also given Ranboo access to the palace's incredible library and all the information that lay inside. He had spent every free second on the clock cooped up in there, devouring book after book on ender-folk, ender hybrids' biology and the medical causes of frequent memory loss. He began to understand his conditions a lot better and found new ways to control and counter them. The sense of control was new, but by the gods it was welcome to no end and before long everyone had started to see a difference too.

In less than six months, Ranboo had gone from a simple scribe in meetings to King Eret's most trusted advisor and friend. His spot was one many courtiers envied and would fight tooth and nail to get, and yet Ranboo had snatched it up from under their noses. It didn't seem like he was going to be budging from it anytime soon either, as King Eret welcomed his help and his advice more than anyone ever had before.

With that, Ranboo let himself grow up at last.

Ranboo had to note, however, how funny it all was. He had forged strong bonds and connections with most of the SMP's most powerful inhabitants. Eret, the King of the Greater SMP; Sapnap, the consort of Kinoko Kingdom's leader; Tubbo, who sat at the head of Snowchester; Technoblade, one of the most powerful warriors to have ever graced History's slate; Sam, the redstone Grand Master, the Warden of Pandora's Vault and ex-leader of the Badlands; and even Philza, the loving partner of Lady Death herself.

Remarkable and powerful people, and then him. He followed them, he cracked jokes with them, he loved them despite being ever so unlike them in achievements, rank and other qualities he often found himself wishing he possessed.

There was them, and then there was him. And yet Ranboo was happy with his life, with his friends. Very happy indeed.

They continued their trek along the Prime Path and before long found themselves emerging from the Greater SMP into another realm entirely.

The Greater SMP, for the most part, was a landlocked state. It hadn't always been so isolated from the sea—once upon a time, its territory had stretched all the way to the reaches of the Northern coastline. As Time and wars raged on, that vast strip of land made up of the moorland, the white chalk cliffs and the beaches had fallen into the clutches of another budding nation that had just started to rear its head. Once the Badlands had officially claimed its coastal territories, its only ocean opening was the L'Manberg estuary, still named after the fallen nation that had once owned it.

During the time that Dream's terrible reputation still reigned supreme, the Badlands had often been perceived as a relatively troublesome nation by the Greater SMP. People had often likened it to the next potential L'Manberg, not only because of its rebellious streak in its creation and general government but also because of the strange, writhing entity that had thrived in the heart of it: the Egg.

Once it and the Nightmare's tempest of uncertainty were gone, however, tensions had subsided and a level-headed reform had taken place. The Badlands was now comfortably entering its fifth year of stability and was on good diplomatic terms with the other realms around it. It was thanks in part to one of its now absent leaders but the conservation of the policies he had adopted post-Red Banquet had been just as successful and assured by the others at the head of the oligarchy.

The Badlands were just as calm, friendly and prosperous as the rest of the SMP's realms, and nowadays it was hard to imagine a world without them in it.

Even King Eret agreed.

There were a number of occasions where the monarch would sigh and stare aimlessly at one of the maps on the wall of the war room, and then, to Ranboo; "You know what? I thought I would regret signing over that land to them, but I don't. I don't think I ever will."

Ranboo never really pried any further and simply replied with a small smile and a mumbled reply of "yeah" before they turned back to other political occupations.

Even now, as they followed the Prime Path from the raised slopes of the Greater SMP and down into the flattened moor of the Badlands, Eret's gaze lingered around them with a fondness Ranboo still found strange even years later.

"Stop," he suddenly instructed, halting the hybrid with an abrupt gentle wave of his hand. He inhaled deeply, raising his head to the breeze. "Just smell."

So Ranboo did. Immediately, he was hit by the fresh and overpowering scent of the last drops of the passing storm that now pooled in the crevices and shallow dips in the ground. It twirled across the air, along with something else. It was a sweeter fragrance, light and airy on the breeze. It reminded him of mossy blankets and wide open skies, laden with the pleasant, earthy musk that was often embedded deep in the gnarled roots of the forest's most stubborn plants.

"Well?"

Ranboo opened his eyes. "Heather, right?" he guessed, gaze lingering briefly on the distant patches of shrubs scattered all over the moor.

The monarch nodded approvingly. "Heather, indeed. You have a keen nose. The flowers are often considered a symbol of good luck and protection, if you choose to believe so."

It wasn't the first time that Eret had stopped them in the middle of something to slip in a small, seemingly random tidbit of knowledge. He had never said why he did, and again, Ranboo had never questioned him about it. That wasn't to say that he didn't have a good number of theories of his own. The strongest of these was that Eret was trying to tuck Ranboo further under his magnificent wings than he already had by somehow picking up where Technoblade's teaching had left off.

Technoblade had taught the hybrid to fight, to strategize and to respect the legends of old. Eret on the other hand was trying to take charge of everything else that the piglin hadn't managed to touch on, to appreciate and understand the smaller things in the world, the beauty of it all. It was in fleeting moments like this that Eret seemed more like a golden-hearted mentor than a royal boss to the hybrid.

The monarch had a way with his words and mannerisms that made every new piece of information seem like a breath of fresh air, another step in the

ongoing journey of growing up that he was still embarking on. His memory books were absolutely crammed with one-off little facts and comments he deemed important.

A new entry that he had hurriedly titled "Heather Flowers" was now the most recent of them.

"Eret!" called out a voice from across the way. Ranboo snapped his journal shut as someone made their way over to them with a brisk, lively stride. An arrowhead tail whipped back and forth behind them, almost wagging like the tail of an excited dog. They stretched out their arms in a greeting. "I was wondering if you'd pay us a visit at some point!"

The monarch bowed back respectfully. "After the tempest, how could I not? None of us have met in person for ages because of it and I thought it was best to remedy that."

"Ah, so you missed us!"

"Diplomatically, yes."

"And socially, as friends?"

Eret laughed, "Even more, of course!"

"I thought so, you muffin!" Bad laughed as well before warmly shaking the monarch's hand. "It's good to see you."

"Likewise."

Then the demon's gaze shifted to Ranboo, as did his hand. "And you too, Ranboo!"

Ranboo sometimes found it hard to say the same.

He liked Bad, he did. He was kind and sweet, and was a close second to Niki when it came to baking muffins. Yet something always nagged at him whenever they crossed paths. Even with his defective memory regularly acting up and erasing traces of past events, something he could somehow never forget was how the demon had almost single handedly ruined his life and reputation. He had lost a life following his actions. The Ender Pamphlet was a tragedy made by many people at once, and their collective mistakes all built up to its fruition. Yes, the Egg was largely responsible for Bad's behaviour, and yet Bad's voice and body was the one who had sneered and threatened him. Ranboo found it hard, even years afterwards, to forgive the vessel the Egg had taken a hold of.

He held out his hand. "It's great to see you as well, Bad."

The demon beamed as they shook hands, his smile brighter than the harsh, post-storm rays of the sun that blinded them from above. In the light, his dark midnight skin and horns almost seemed to melt into the imposing, lava cast edifice of Pandora's Vault that sat on a man-made island just across from one of the Badland's beaches. His two brilliant white eyes and the pale freckles that dusted his cheeks glowed like small stars, alight and lively with an infinite sense of kindness so strong and comforting that Ranboo couldn't help but lean into it all and relax.

The differences that had come between them in the past should very well stay in the past. Ranboo seemed to be the only one who was still hanging onto the last few threads of them.

"How did the Badlands fare?" Eret asked, circling back to their business at hand.

"Surprisingly well, actually." Bad crossed his arms and cast a couple of long looks around them, visibly satisfied. "The moor has its advantages. Most of the terrain has been kept intact, although a few of the fields have to be completely hoed and planted again. The forests, as I've heard from Ant, have survived as well. The flower fae sure know how to hold their own and their home together, it's truly remarkable."

As they talked, they began to walk.

"What about property damage?"

"That's a little more delicate. The mansion lost a couple of columns though. We'll be sending a regiment to Las Nevadas to get some quartz, but that's the easiest fix. A couple of the neighbourhoods have been knocked down completely and the rest aren't as sturdy as we first thought either. We'll have to rebuild about ninety-percent of them."

"We can provide the timber and stone you need."

"That's what I was hoping to ask you about, thank you. We'll pay you back when we've finish draining the mines." Bad pointed to a couple of the distant buildings topped with tall chimneys that sat along the coastline. Ranboo could just about make out the faint glint of metal redstone pumps churning beside them, their pipes disappearing into the shafts and spewing out copious amounts of water into the sea. "They should be dried and back in use by the end of the week."

"Actually, forget the riches: we might ask your redstone engineers for a pump or two of our own to clean up the last bits of the Greater SMP."

"Be my guest. Does Kinoko need any too?"

"We'll find out when we head off that way."

"Well, please send word if they do," Bad said, "our engineers would be more than happy to do their part in helping the other realms."

"And what about the Snowchester bridge?"

"Intact," both Bad and Ranboo said in unison. The demon gave the hybrid a pleasantly surprised look.

Ranboo cleared his throat as an apology, but then went on to say; "It's intact, as is the rest of Snowchester. The storm in the tundra wasn't any more than an average blizzard. We're all relieved."

"That's reassuring to hear."

Ranboo agreed, then went back to writing down the important information in his journal.

"Your memory seems to be getting better," Bad noted cheerfully.

Ranboo's hand tightened around his pen. The smile he gave back was forced. "Yes, yes it is."

It was clear that the demon meant no harm by his comment, but by the gods if that didn't strike a nerve nonetheless...

Bad was just on the edge of saying something more and even opened his mouth to speak. Instead, he was suddenly cut off by the call of his name as someone rushed up the Prime Path and screeched to a halt by his side.

The newcomer's sun-kissed and diamond encrusted skin were blinding, the gems casting bright blue spots onto the wooden path and the humid moorland around it. He pushed unceremoniously past Ranboo, just missing knocking him off the road entirely.

"Bad, you won't fucking believe this—!"

"Language, Skeppy," the demon sighed. "Especially in front of our esteemed guests here."

Ranboo managed to catch his balance again and straightened his posture, regaining some of his fallen dignity—quite literally. King Eret, on the other hand, offered the newcomer a smile.

Skeppy was suddenly snapped back into reality, as if he simply hadn't noticed the reigning monarch of their most powerful neighbouring nation standing there with his ridiculously tall and lanky advisor. He had always been far less calm and controlled as the other leaders of the Badlands. Any single ounce of nobility or, gods forbid, humility and modesty was scarce. He seemed far more suited out of a place of power rather than deep within the structured palace of its beating heart.

He bowed to Eret with meager deference, promptly ignoring him afterwards. "We've found something in the mines," he told Bad. "You might want to come and have a look."

Bad looked like he was about to decline but upon seeing the apparent and unfamiliar urgency in Skeppy's eyes, something switched. He nodded sharply before turning apologetically to the visitors.

"We'll schedule a meeting to sort the deals out," he promised. "I'm so sorry about this, but duty calls."

"Please, go and answer it," Eret graciously replied, releasing him from their conversation with nothing but a smile. "We never meant to keep you for long."

The demon responded by way of another respectful—albeit apologetic—bow and quickly rushed off after his diamond-encrusted companion.

Ranboo tapped his pen against the cover of his journal, frowning. "Do you think it's serious?"

"I certainly hope not, but even if it was, we'd try to help in any way we can."

"Providing that they ask for the help, right?"

"Of course. We don't want to butt in where we don't belong. We may be allies now, but all the realms are still independent. The Badlands will ask for help if they need it."

"Still, I've noticed something," Ranboo said as they began to walk back the way they came.

Eret raised an eyebrow and coaxed him on with a smile. "What is it?"

"We—I mean you, sire, are very involved with the other nations. More than they are in our own affairs."

"Do you think that's a bad thing?"

"No, not necessarily, but I just find it a little odd." Ranboo racked his brains. "I don't know how to explain it, but it's almost like it's a part of your job, like the other nations are an extension of it..."

"Like I'm behaving as much like their leader as their own leaders are?"

He snapped his fingers. "Exactly."

King Eret began to laugh, thankfully. It didn't seem like Ranboo had accidentally offended him. "Maybe I should lay off a little, right?"

"No, I don't mean it like that—"

"I know you didn't, but it's a good point. Thank you for bringing it up."

Ranboo held his tongue, just in case he felt like screwing anything else up while he was at it.

A raspy squawk pierced through the awkward quiet that had installed itself. Ranboo raised his head just in time to avoid the black feathered ball of death that came barreling his way. It was carrying a letter. It missed him by a hair's length and swooped up again into the clear blue sky.

"What on earth was that?" Eret spluttered, readjusting his crown.

Ranboo winced as he watched the mass start to circle, then dive back down straight towards him. "An incoming concussion..."

The mangy crow—who was so scraggly and spindly that Ranboo was surprised it wasn't dead yet—crash-landed on the top of the hybrid's head and began to impatiently knock its beak against his horns. Ranboo reached up and took the envelope from it.

"Thank you, Brian."

The crow peered down at Ranboo and cawed in a loud, raspy voice, head jerking forward like that of a chicken's. Its eyes bulged like a fish's, and there didn't seem to be a single thought behind them.

He looked at the names scribbled on the front and immediately broke out into a wide grin.

Eret noticed. "Does a duty call you as well?"

Ranboo sheepishly nodded. "I'm really sorry."

"Is it another one of those letters you can't tell me about?"

"It might be."

The monarch, ever generous and understanding, dismissed him with a smile and a small, playful eye roll. "Go ahead, then. You can get the rest of the day off."

"Thank you, Your—" He stopped himself, shoving the unwanted title right down to the back of his throat where it belonged. "Thank you."

Ranboo headed off with a brisk pace soon after, before Eret could turn around and stop him. He knew he wouldn't in any case, even if Ranboo was never entirely honest with what the bimonthly letters really were, and who they were sent by. There was no real harm in doing so, in hindsight, and yet there was still something that stopped the hybrid from doing so. There was a certain, strange sense of intimacy about them that simply stopped him from mentioning or reading them aloud to anyone except those mentioned on the envelope.

As it were, today there were two of them on it. Ranboo's own, and someone else. He knew exactly where to find the other one mentioned.

Earlier that morning, when they both rose at the crack of dawn and went on to share a few words, he had told Ranboo where he would be—fixing a small little shack that had been torn down in the storm. Ranboo had mindlessly jotted down the location just in case, not really thinking that he'd need it. Brian had proved him wrong mere minutes ago.

His feet carried him to a pine forest just off the Prime Path in the Greater SMP, where the sweetberries grew abundantly and the squirrels pounced daintily through the branches. Brian left his spot on the hybrid's head and flew off to give chase to one of them. Ranboo meanwhile kept walking, venturing deeper and deeper through the trees until he hit a quaint little clearing. In a glade so isolated, he hadn't imagined there to be much life. He was wrong. The whole place was bustling with the tools and work of a two-man construction army. Planks, hammers and saws lay haphazardly across the floor. A picnic hamper was left untouched for the time being on top of a rock. Up in an oak tree, the dilapidated fragments of what looked to have once been a treehouse still clung on to the trunk for dear life. The rest of it was tossed into a pile. Some looked beyond repair, but others were salvageable, which is exactly what one of the figures was doing. A heavy-

duty welding mask was drawn over his face and a redstone-powered sanding tool in his hand—most likely of his own conception and creation.

Ranboo stepped over the five-year old remains of the start of an abandoned vegetable patch and tried to catch the sander's attention, to no avail. He finally ended up having to raise his voice and outright yell his name.

"Tubbo!"

The two sheep-like ears peeking out either side of the mask cocked his way. The sanding stopped and the tool was switched off by the flick of a lever. The builder raised the visor, revealing his cocky little smirk, the burnt half of his face and light peach fuzz of a stubble he couldn't quite manage to grow out properly yet.

"Well well," he chuckled. "I knew you'd manage to escape Eret and come. Ready to help out?"

"Maybe later." Ranboo waved the letter in front of his face with a grin of his own. As Tubbo's eyes lit up, the hybrid turned to the rest of the construction site littered around them. "You've been busy."

"Absolutely. The winds almost knocked down the entire thing and damaged what was left. We had to tear most of it down ourselves and be very ruthless with what we could save and what we couldn't."

Tubbo lay down his tools and took off his mask, proceeding to tie his floppy hair back into a bun. As he did, his vest pulled up a little and the strong stench of wet wool slapped Ranboo in the face. The hours of heavy work had certainly done a number on his body odour.

As the hybrid turned away, his gaze landed on the project in question. There was a clear and stark difference between the old handiwork of the two seventeen year-old boys and the repairs one of them was now making as an adult. Even in its half-finished state, laid on the floor in pieces instead of up in the tree, it was still enough to make Ranboo's heart tighten with regret.

"I just wished I could have seen it back then," he sighed wistfully, grief once more starting to gnaw at the edges of his heart.

It was swiftly dulled by the mischievous grunt of a nearby little helper who brandished his paintbrush like a sword and glared at the hybrid with disdain.

"Are my painting skills not good enough?" Michael challenged, threatening to slash the hybrid with a streak of crimson.

"Oh no," he rushed to correct himself, dodging his son's playful lunges.
"They're unrivaled."

The piglin grunted in satisfaction, "Thought so."

Proudly, he got back to work, slathering thick coats of red paint all over the newly sawed and sanded planks. It was haphazard and abstract at best, but fit perfectly with the treehouse in construction. At the tender age of eleven and a half, Michael was as cheeky and fiery as ever—with a hefty portion of a heavy-duty stubbornness only piglins could have thrown in for good measure—and yet Ranboo still smiled sadly. He was still too young to understand grief and how it worked, how long it could hang around for, and how utterly painful it was.

Ranboo watched him fondly for a minute or two, soon joined by Tubbo.

"Yeah," the ram replied to his previous statement, sharing Ranboo's wistful sigh, and undoubtedly his pain too. "It was a pretty special place. Unstable, but special. That damned raccoon was right all along." He chuckled softly to himself. "I thought we might just keep it around as a keepsake, y'know? Maybe make it a place for Michael and other kids to play in."

"That sounds nice," Ranboo agreed.

They then fell silent for a moment or two, simply staring at the tree and losing themselves behind a veil of memories. They were ever so bittersweet, even if most of them made them smile when they came to visit their night and day dreams. Despite all the happy times, one single, dark cloud would still hang over them no matter what. It was the one that reminded them why they could no longer take place again. No amount of victories was worth the pain of the one they had all lost.

Their trance was broken up abruptly by Tubbo clapping and rubbing his hands together. "Anyhow, the letter."

"The letter."

At least one blast from the past could still stay strong, alive and joyful.

Ranboo and Tubbo headed over to the rock on which sat the weaved picnic hamper and began to set up their—decidedly early—lunch. Michael joined them as soon as the smell of the potato and egg sandwiches reached his snout. He snatched one behind his two dads' backs and began munching happily, swiping at the friendly and persistent crow hovering around them all who tried to steal the crumbs.

Ranboo started to open and unfold the letter, taking a second to simply breathe it in. The stiff ocean salt and breeze still stuck to the parchment, along with a strong, musky fragrance of gunpowder that belonged to its sender.

"Well, what does it say?" Tubbo demanded impatiently. He leaned forwards, his hoof tapping relentlessly against the stone.

The hybrid rolled his eyes and cast him an amused look. "Patience, young one," he teased.

"I swear to the gods, Ranboo—"

"Alright, alright! Don't get your horns in a twist."

"Har, har, har," the ram grumbled. "Very funny."

He cast a disdainful look towards them and their relatively short and stubby nature. They were far from the voluptuously and magnificently curled ones of other sheep hybrids, and it was a topic that Ranboo knew he was mildly sensitive about. Only mildly, though.

"It is, actually."

Ranboo paused once more, simply just taking in the weight of the letter. Perhaps some of his friends had left indeed, either for an eternal sleep or from one day to the next without telling anyone. However, he was happy that at least one of them was still leaving a mark on their lives, no matter how small it was. It certainly beat the unwanted present of a cold, hard and dead statue.

He finally cleared his throat, and began to read aloud.

"Where are you taking me?"

"You'll see."

The light of Skeppy's torch cast burning auras over the curved and rocky walls of the passage. Slivers of it danced off the blue gems encrusted into his skin, making sparkling blue spots appear across the earth and stone. Bad tiptoed behind him, his tail looped nervously around his leg. The clammy and cramped path closed in around him, squeezing out memories of similar, past experiences he often tried to forget. The last two times he had ventured into a similar space, it had been to either worship an extraterrestrial demonic

entity or to kill an old friend. Not the best things to be reminded of as he trudged down a morbidly familiar way.

"Can you at least tell me something about all this? Please?"

Skeppy didn't answer.

"Skeppy, please."

He turned around. "I can't," he said. "You need to see it for yourself."

Before Bad could ask him any other questions, he resumed walking. The demon couldn't do anything else but follow and keep his interrogations and nerves at bay.

They came out soon after into a brightly lit cavern. Miners were hard at work already, hacking at the walls with pickaxes and loading off ores in sacks and minecarts. A couple of engineers were down there too, moving the pipes of the pumping machine aboveground to a new, dipped down flooded area where the miners walked and worked. What truly struck Bad as a surprise, however, was the contents of the cave itself. His eyes only briefly glossed over the diamond and gold veins running across the walls in favour of the sheer amount of greenery that was there. Small shrubs of glow-berries and azalea bushes dotted the ground, rooted in patches of wet clay that made up the edges of the terraced pools working their way down from the passage. Mangrove trees and drip-leaves dipped their own roots in the shallows, healthy and bursting with colour even being so far underground. Small little clusters of white flowers sunken into the water added the final touch to the scene, blooming far under the surface and glowing with the enchanting, fairy-like beauty of stars freshly plucked from the heavens and carefully laid at the feet of the mortals who so longed to touch them. They provided excellent nests and hiding spots for the pastel-tinted axolotls that crept in and out of their depths. From the line of water damage stretching low around the bottom of the mangroves, it seemed that the flooding this far below hadn't been extreme and had still allowed the ecosystem to thrive.

Bad still couldn't believe his eyes. "I didn't know we were sitting on top of a lush cave," he admitted, in awe of it all. He knelt down and dipped one of his long claws into one of the pools, inadvertently frightening the shrimps and amphibian wildlife that lived there. "Antfrost will have a field day."

"Yeah, it's cool and all," Skeppy huffed, growing visibly impatient. "It's not what we're here to see."

"It's not?" The demon stood up again. "Then what is it?"

"If Ant's going to have a field day with the flowers, then you're certainly going to have one too."

"How come?"

This time, Skeppy grabbed his hand and forcefully dragged him behind him. They ventured deeper into the cavern, deeper than the miners and engineers had been. Before long, the light of their powerful lanterns faded away, as did the churning of the redstone pump. Once again, it was just the two of them, their footsteps and their single torch. The walk suddenly became more and more difficult, and Bad's stride was weighed down by the flooding that was still very much present further down. It started at their ankles and then crept up until they were wading knee-deep in the water and still going. It felt like they had been trudging for ages and ages, and Bad was starting to grow tired.

He was just about to whine to Skeppy when he suddenly stopped and flashed the light of his flame in the demon's face.

"*This* is why I came to get you."

He then cast the light in front of him, and Bad froze. They had reached what seemed like a dead end—a wall pieced together by fallen stones and boulders, undoubtedly remains of a crumbling tunnel blown open carelessly by TNT. It was humid and slimy, covered in glistening water that dripped onto the flooded floor and an unusual, dark turquoise mold that glittered with hints of silver. But Bad barely acknowledged any of that. His horrified gaze was focused on one thing and one thing alone.

The crimson red tendril that curled out from between the cracks in the stone.

It was small, it was insignificant, and yet it sent a violent knife of terror straight into Bad's chest.

He took a step back. "That's impossible..." he gasped out through a tight throat. "The Egg was destroyed..."

"It was," Skeppy agreed, then to the demon's horror reached out and touched the tendril with his bare hand. "I can't hear any voices or feel any pulls, so it's definitely not attached to a source anymore. Maybe it was just a spore that somehow found its way out and grew a little. Maybe there was a flower behind the wall before it caved in. I don't know. I just thought it was better to show you."

From a political point of view, to protect the Badlands, yes it was. But as a friend, as someone who knew the nightmares Bad and others had gone through because of the Egg, it was the worst idea imaginable.

"We should leave," he pushed out with some difficulty. He turned around. "We'll get an investigation team together or something to check it all out. Until then, we're *leaving*."

He began to walk again, only stopping when he realized that he wasn't being followed. He looked over his shoulder.

"Skeppy?"

"Bad, look."

He didn't want to, but he did anyway. What he saw somehow shocked him more than the potential return of the Egg.

The dark turquoise mold that was scattered around the tendril was moving slowly but surely, spreading from one area to another with small, crackling echoes. It crept over and into the cracks in the wall, reaching the Egg's growth...

Bad stifled a gasp.

The mold began to eat the tendril. The sparkling, crawling mass began to eat it.

Bad watched with wide, frightened eyes as the red disappeared completely beneath the sea of fungus. The mass choked the crimson with a sickening crunch. It then lay flat, motionless. The tendril was nowhere to be found. It was gone.

"What the fuck...?"

Bad, for the first time ever, had no other words than the same ones that came out of Skeppy's mouth.

What the fuck.

Chapter Four: We

Sapnap was born a slave.

At least, he thought he was. He didn't remember anything about his parents and a life of arduous service was the backdrop of every one of his earliest memories. So he had to have been, right? If he had been born anywhere else, perhaps he could have had a good and normal life. Maybe he would have turned out differently. Unfortunately, in the realm he grew up in, that was not the case.

Fireborns were dangerous, fireborns were hellspawn, fireborns had to be watched and shown whose control they were under. Fireborns were nothing more than disposable livestock for others to use as they wished.

During the first fifteen years or so of his life, Sapnap could take a little comfort in the fact that he was slightly better off than others in the same, enslaved predicament. His master was a wealthy lord who owned a spacious mansion or two and countless acres of land. The few fireborns he had under his thumb were confined to the inside, taking care of the fires, the lights, the cooking and occasionally, when the time called for it, entertainment. Fireborns were considered savages, yes, but their fire powers also held striking beauty within them. No one, no matter how cruel and heartless, could deny that. Their magical light shows dazzled guests far more than any firework display ever could. Creating whimsical and breathtaking fire displays became Sapnap's main area of expertise, and his master favoured him for it.

Favoured was perhaps too strong a word for what it really was: Sapnap was simply whipped and beaten less than his fellow fireborns. That didn't mean he wasn't humiliated. That didn't mean he was immune to jeers, sharp remarks and back-breaking orders. That didn't mean that he didn't hate every day with a burning passion.

It was a passion so fiery and menacing that he could have used it to win his freedom through rebellion, blood and violence. He could have, but he didn't. It was doused regularly by a wave of hopelessness that crashed down time and time again over his head, beating him with salted lashes across open wounds. The anger was painstakingly pushed back down, and it spent years and years bubbling and churning inside him like scalding magma.

For fifteen years, he was a volcano just waiting to erupt until one day, he did.

The moment he escaped was a blur at best and he couldn't remember much of it. He couldn't recall what had finally pushed him to run, or how the heck he managed to evade the countless patrols sent out to find him. He ran and ran until he reached the realm's border, then ran some more. He had no money, no belongings, no home.

His first good memory was when two boys, a couple of years older than him, showed him the first acts of kindness anyone ever had. They helped him get back on his feet and before long, Clay and George became his first ever friends and his only family. Another wave kept his anger at bay, but this one was pleasant enough. It was warm and homely. It lasted for a while and during that time, Sapnap managed to love a relatively happy life. He even began to explore the thought that he'd grow old and die in peace.

That was until L'Manberg came along, until the SMP was bathed in blood.

Then his fury was unleashed.

In times of war and tension, he let it run abound. He garnered a reputation as a fierce and flaming fighter. He fought, he slaughtered. People and beasts alike felt his wrath. He killed countless dogs and horses, animals that he judged were always treated better in his old master's care than he and his kind were.

(His only soft spot happened to be for fish. They too had lived a miserable existence in the master's house where the fireborns were forced to kill and fry them everyday. They could clearly understand each other's pain.)

He was called a monster, a pyromaniac, an animal murderer—maybe he was. He didn't want to be, but years of pent-up torment forced him down that path of bloodshed. He thought that he'd stay that way forever.

That was until he fell in love, until he joined the Syndicate, until he was reminded that there was more to life than senseless vengeance and unquenchable rage. The first and only person he had talked to about his past had been Ranboo, and he was sure it had only slipped out because he found the young hybrid's defective memory reassuring. Anyway, if Time hadn't erased that confession over the years, then the bloodied events of the Red Banquet that had followed mere hours later undoubtedly had. Ranboo never mentioned any of it ever again, even following Clay's defeat.

Sapnap now finally tried to lean back into the new harmony, no longer controlled by the past as he once was. He was managing quite well.

"Karl—"

"Sapnap! You're here!" Karl perked up suddenly from his place at the window and hurriedly beckoned the fireborn over to him. "Come, quickly!"

Sapnap took a moment to take off his cloak and put down the basket of cinnamon rolls Niki had baked for them, and quickly joined his fiancé in the sunlight. The air was still heavy with the last few specks of humidity from the

storms and blew a gentle freshness into the room. He took Karl's hand and squeezed it gently. He shuffled aside and nudged the fireborn closer to the sill, his hands sliding up to his shoulders and positioning him just right with the same giddy excitement of a child.

Then, Karl latched himself around his arm and lay his head against his shoulder. "Can you hear that?"

Sapnap closed his eyes for a moment, cycling through the outdoor sounds until he found the correct one. Through all the sawing and hammering going on below, the chatter of the Kinokians as they cleaned their streets of debris and the golden gongs signaling the shift changes, one small and almost insignificant whistle reached his ears. It was soon followed by high-pitched chirping and the soft beating of young, featherless wings.

His face broke out into a wide smile and he opened his eyes. "The eggs hatched."

"They did!" Karl tugged on his arm again. "Can you still see the nest? What do you see?"

What do you see?

The single question that would bring about the creation of entire worlds, of painted pictures drawn by pure and beautiful words.

Sapnap's eyes immediately focused on the branches of the blooming cherry tree planted right outside. The dainty little blossoms blocked most of the view with a mosaic of pastel pink petals tied down to thin, rigid and angular twigs of dark brown. The bright midday sky was peeping through small breaks in the foliage, warm and blue and ever so inviting. The view was similar to the exquisitely sewn patterns printed on Kinoko Kingdom's lavish silks and clothes, save for one small difference. One small addition that chattered and twittered away.

He smiled. "It's all still there."

Karl tutted. "Come on, you've got to do better than that!"

Sapnap always did, he just liked being a bit of a tease. "Alright, alright! As you wish—"

"And don't leave anything out, I want to hear about everything!"

"Everything?"

"Everything."

"I don't know, love," Sapnap teased. "You're asking for a lot..."

"Sapnap!"

"Alright, alright," he chuckled, giving in. "Your wish is my command."

Karl's head rested in the crook of his shoulder. "I'm ready."

Sapnap's hand came up to cup his cheek and run his fingers through his auburn curls.

"Nestled in the crook of two sturdy and slightly thicker branches, is the nest," he began. "It hasn't changed much since last time. The base is still tightly knit together and soft green moss still cushions the edges."

"Go on..."

"There are a few new feathers tucked into the twigs. The mother bird has been making it warmer for her eggs. It's the same one, the bluejay. Only one thing has drastically changed. The four, speckled blue eggs are no longer there. One of them was thrown out. It's on the floor below, shattered and bathed in the yolk. I think the mother realized it was a bad one..."

"Oh, poor soul..."

"But the three others have hatched into healthy-looking chicks. They're tiny. I could probably fit all of them in the palm of my hand, and they're covered in a pearly-grey down of wispy, soft plumage. They're definitely not as magnificent looking and blue as their mother, but I'm sure they'll get there in no time at all. It's quite funny, actually: they look very grumpy. Without the feathers around their faces, their oversized beaks make them look like they're frowning. They look like little grumpy grandpas already, it's hilarious. They chitter and bicker just like them too. Despite all of that, though, they're still so young. They'll be flying off before we or their mother knows it."

He could go on and on, but in the end that seemed to be all Karl needed to know.

"Thank you."

A soft, beautiful kiss landed on Sapnap's cheek and in a sudden moment of heated adoration he captured his love's lips in his and deepened the embrace.

He was lucky to have found someone like Karl, someone who wasn't scared of him, someone who wasn't chased away by his searing hot skin, someone who loved him and wanted to marry him for who he was. Never in a million years would he have ever thought that would happen to him one day. He had always thought that he'd only ever bond with friends—and even that seemed like a stretch to a younger him.

When they pulled apart, the fireborn held his fiancé's face between his warm, gentle gloved hands. He stared soulfully into Karl's eyes, even if he sadly knew that he would not do the same. Karl's smile was bright and wide, its soft and bouncy edges glimmering with sparks of joy and starlight. It was a smile that could create and destroy countries, worlds, planets, even galaxies.

His eyes, on the other hand, had lost everything. The gaze that matched his smile was now grey, dull, damaged, dead. Karl used to see so much, including things that no one else could. So much more than what was just in front of him. Now his eyes saw nothing. They were completely and utterly unseeing.

Sapnap's gentle hold became a guilty one. His thumb traced the small, almost indistinguishable burn scars scattered between Karl's freckles, remnants of a tragic crossfire he had never wanted this fiancé to get caught in. The fire that had saved the SMP from the Egg had also been the one that had stolen the sight of the fireborn's true love. He would never forgive himself for lighting the fuse that had changed Karl's entire life.

Never.

Karl knew that.

"Hey." He reached up and pried Sapnap's hands away from his face. He held them in his own and pressed comforting touches to the burning skin concealed beneath the oilskin gloves. "What have I always told you?"

"That it's not my fault," Sapnap sighed. "I know, but I still can't help but think it is. I'm sorry. That guilt will just never leave me alone no matter how much I want it to..."

"You need to keep trying. You don't deserve to be tortured over it."

"But—"

"If anything, I'm glad for it. Now I can truly focus on what really matters." Karl dropped his hands, encircling Sapnap's back with his arms instead. "What matters is you. We matter."

We matter.

Karl was the one who truly mattered in all this. Sapnap would die for him, and more.

He was never good with words—at least not good enough to put his emotions into them—and his actions tended to be loud, boisterous and brash. He knew it and try as he may, he couldn't do much about it. The upcoming wedding was going to be the true link between them, the one way the fireborn would be able to express his devotion. Perhaps to others, it was merely a superficial celebration of a love everyone already knew about, but to Sapnap it would be so much more.

It would stand for everything he had trouble doing himself.

It would be beautiful, and it would be everything.

"Have you seen George recently?"

Sapnap pulled back a little. "No, why?"

Karl sighed. "I'm worried about him. Something tells me he's not himself."

"Are you sure he's not just burnt out from the wedding preparations? You did shove him into the committee after all."

"Hey!" Karl cried, indignantly and playfully huffing. "He was an eager volunteer!"

"Still, are you sure he's not half-dead because of that?"

"No. It's about something else, I can feel it."

Karl frowned, his whole face darkening. If Sapnap had learned anything, it was that Karl's intuition was something to be trusted. It was almost always right, and scarily accurate at that. If he said that George was troubled by something, George was troubled.

The fireborn had a good idea by what. "I'll check up on him," he promised.

Before he left, he kissed Karl again, and suddenly took note of the strange spicy residue on his lips and the faintly glowing sheen on his skin.

"Fire Resistance?" he checked. His voice turned deep and gravelly, his thumb swiping over the other's bottom lip teasingly slowly. "I wonder what that could be for, hm?"

Karl smiled knowingly. "It's for later—if you're up to it, love..."

Sapnap would have been a complete fool to refuse.

Finding George was a treasure hunt in of itself. Sapnap had to go around the whole of Kinoko at least twice and talk to a good majority of the Council members, as well as workmen and decorators that were cleaning and dressing up the streets respectively. Eventually, when each wild goose chase yielded nothing, he managed to find him himself. George was up on a small plateau, alone except for the grand dragon statue that looked out over the kingdom with a regal, gem-encrusted stare.

Now, Sapnap could have acted like any other sane being. He could have walked up to the ridge on foot, announced his arrival and talked to his best friend calmly and with decorum.

However, that wasn't how the fireborn liked to roll. He had another idea.

He instead got his hands on an enderpearl, angled it correctly, and threw it. A moment later, he was whizzing through the air and plummeting towards the ground. He let out a loud, joyous cry of warning and landed directly next to George. He tackled him to the ground, eliciting a cry of surprise.

"Oh, George!"

He shoved George's head under his arm and ruffled his hair as his best friend squirmed and thrashed around like a fish out of water.

"Sap, lay off!"

"Aw, did someone wake up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"No, but—*gah!* Why are you like this?"

"Because I love you, Gogy!" He gave him a big, sloppy kiss on the cheek. "Why else?"

"Well of your love language is enderpearling into people, scaring the life out of them and physically assaulting them, then all my thoughts and prayers go out to Karl!"

Finally, George managed to wriggle his way out of Sapnap's hold. He staggered away as fast as he could, his hair a mess and his goggles perched at an awkward angle halfway down over his eye. He readjusted them and

tried to discipline his hair, watching his reflection in the water and muttering to himself. Sapnap leaned against the pedestal on which sat the dragon statue. He had the laziest, sleaziest smile on his face. He knew he did from the way the other rolled his eyes. It was one that only grew the more frustrated George got.

"It's good to see you," the fireborn said.

"Likewise."

George's reply may have seemed cold and uncaring at first, but Sapnap knew better. Despite all their bickering and silly little arguments, George could never truly get angry at Sapnap, and vice-versa. It was practically impossible. That made the challenge to seriously piss the other off all the more enticing.

The fireborn cocked his head to the side. "How are things going?"

"Could be better." George shrugged. He pulled away from the water's edge. "The storm did a number on some of the homes and pagodas, not to mention the fallen dark oaks. They blocked some of the forest paths and destroyed some roofs. The builders are dealing with all that right now."

Sapnap raised a puzzled eyebrow. "Good, but I mean—"

"Oh, and Velvet dropped by earlier for specifics regarding the wedding catering. We sent the list but forgot to give them any colour palettes or themes. Since you don't have one, we settled for classic white. Is that alright with you?"

"Yes, but how are *you* doing?"

"We saw some smoke rising from a clearing and went to investigate," George continued, as if he hadn't heard him. "Turns out, it was nothing to worry about: it was just a couple of youngsters setting up camp. I let them stay, I hope that's alright—"

"George, for gods' sake, shut up." Sapnap caught him by his shoulders and spun him around to face him. "Please just answer me. Are you alright?"

George fell quiet for a long, tense moment or two. He averted his eyes from the fireborn's face. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Sapnap scoffed. "You're lying."

"You don't know that."

"I do, because I know you, George. You're not alright."

He was gripping him so hard that he could start to feel his best friend squirm against his heated hands. He pulled away, expecting George to bolt. Instead, he stayed where he was, eyes drawn down to the floor and his arms wrapped around himself.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me, George. You can trust me."

"I know," George replied in a dull, monotone voice.

Before he went on, he went and sat down on the stone bench beside the pool. Sapnap sat down next to him, angling his head in order to hide the sun's blinding light behind the looming shadow of the dragon statue. His gaze fell to the water's perfect and pristine surface, but not for too long. To think that there had been a time he had wanted to throw himself in and never come back up, to stay until every single burning part of him was extinguished and he drowned.

That fate was no longer the most tempting—at least for Sapnap. George on the other hand seemed very ready to dive in head first.

"You're the first one of us to get married and I just thought that we'd all be there with you."

Us.

We.

Sapnap knew exactly who George was referring to.

"You're going to be there," he reminded his best friend, giving him a little nudge to the shoulder.

"But Clay won't be."

His heart sank. "Yeah, I guess he won't, huh?"

Privately, the same thoughts had been taunting Sapnap regularly since the wedding date had been officially announced. During the preparations, he couldn't stop thinking of Clay—not who he became, Dream, but who he had been before. His best friend who had promised him so much and had given

him the stars, who he had loved senselessly like a brother, wasn't going to be there. He was dead, and there was no bringing him back.

On the day of the final battle, it had been unanimously decided that the Revival Book was no longer wanted by anyone, and thus killing the source of its knowledge would yield no repercussions. Still, a part of Sapnap wished that there was some other way to gain the power it held. He had heard rumours of the different ways to revive someone, and personally he had three intact lives, two of which he would be happy to spare. He would have given everything just to have Clay stand by his side again at the altar, even for just a minute or two.

It was the one thing he wanted above all else, and it was the one thing he'd never be able to get.

Where there were three, there were now two. Even five years later, they were still having trouble coming to terms with it all.

"I sometimes wish I had never met him," George confessed abruptly. He was still refusing to look at Sapnap. "That way it wouldn't hurt as much as it does."

The fireborn hummed thoughtfully, not entirely agreeing with him. "I'm thankful for the times we did have, but yeah. The pain sucks. Could really do without it."

George sighed. Sapnap did too. He put his arm around his best friend and pulled him closer.

And they left it there. They always did. As soon as the conversation turned too real, they stopped it. Make-belief was fine. Make-belief was homely. If they could stay in it a little longer, they would—and they did.

But the darker thoughts didn't leave them, far from it. They kept floating around their heads like the dark storm clouds that had been hanging around the realms, and nothing they could say or do could ever disperse them. Nothing but the return of the one they loved so dearly.

That, of course, was something that was never going to happen. They had lost Clay for good in so many ways, and now they had to simply accept it, no matter how hard it was. No matter how long it took.

Sapnap had just hoped that it would have been before the happiest day of his life.

"And it just—what—ate the tendril?"

"Yes!" Bad threw his hands up in the air, exasperated. "It just ate it!"

"Are you certain?"

Antfrost leaned back in his seat, his muzzle pinched into a thin, concerned line. His nose and whiskers twitched nervously as did the end of his tail. His silky tan and cream pelt was ruffled and standing on edge.

"I'm still... I don't know, Bad. Are you sure it wasn't a trick of the light?"

"Positive."

"And you've been laying off the apple juice, right?"

"For the last time, I don't drink—"

"I know, I'm just trying to figure this out by eliminating all the possibilities."

"There are no other possibilities."

"But what if—"

"Ant, I swear to the gods, I know what I saw. Skeppy did too!"

Skeppy, who unfortunately wasn't there to back him up and had instead been sent on the quarry haul to the ruins of Las Nevadas. Luckily, it seemed like Bad wouldn't need any extra persuasion. His macabre recount seemed to have weaved its magic with its audience.

The White Mansion's empty meeting room was all but silent save for the loud sounds of Ant's claws anxiously tearing apart the edge of the table. Bad had to lightly swat him away to get him to stop, and even threaten to assault the cat with a spray bottle.

"We're already getting the curtains and the sofa sewn back together, I don't want to have to call in the carpenter as well."

"Right, sorry."

"It just... It just doesn't make any sense," the demon groaned, returning to the bigger problem at hand.

"It does."

Bad shrugged, completely out of ideas and words. "Enlighten me, then."

"Storms are devastating, yes," Antfrost explained, "but they're also cleansing. They clear the air and the rain freshens up the ground. Why else do we use the expression "after the storm" when everything falls back into place, or "before the storm" when things are just starting to reach a stagnant breaking point? By refreshing the climate, especially as drastically as this one has because it hung around so long, it's given the whole of the SMP's environment a new lease of life. Everything's going to flourish, including species of plants that maybe we haven't seen around much. Maybe this blue mold is just one of them."

"And the red tendril?"

"If Skeppy said that he hasn't felt its pull, I believe him. He was the one the Egg really latched onto, and he'd know its power better than anyone after having lived with it writhing inside him for over a year."

"I guess so..."

"Anyway, if this blue stuff can indeed destroy the tendrils, then quite honestly I think we should just let it. I don't know what it is, but it's alright in my book."

Antfrost leaned back in his chair and popped his feet up on the table with a satisfied purr. Bad wished he could be as relaxed and carefree as he was, but he simply couldn't. The whole thing was still twisting and turning inside him relentlessly, tugging back at strings of guilt and pushing him back towards a worrying precipice. He leaned against the edge of the table and sighed deeply.

"Why do all the weird, unknown and dangerous growths always appear in the Badlands?" he asked under his breath. "Why is it always us...?"

He knew for a fact that was a question Antfrost couldn't find a scientific answer to.

"I don't know, Bad. I guess it just is."

The demon hung his head between his outstretched arms and growled in frustration, right before craning his neck up to a picture on the wall. There were a few of these full-length portraits hanging around the meeting room, all painted in a similar style to one another, and all remarkably accurate to the likeness of the subjects they depicted. Bad didn't know if that made it more of a blessing or a curse.

He took a moment to simply stare at the figure clad in the shining golden armour. He was wearing a crown that he bore it better than most—even if it was no secret that he had never wanted it in the first place.

"Gods above, Sam, why did you have to leave?" Bad sighed, his eyes wandering to the portrait of the sea captain hung up next to Sam's. "Both of you, just... why?"

Of course, the paintings' realism only stretched so far. Neither Sam nor Puffy's portraits answered him. He knew they wouldn't, and yet he was still disappointed.

"If they were here, I bet you they'd be just as stumped as we are," Antfrost offered with a twinkling eye and a twitch of his whiskers.

Bad sighed again, but smiled. He let himself fall backwards into a chair. "Still, they managed to resist the Egg's pull and helped take it down. We didn't do either of those things. It would have been reassuring to know that at least some of us in power would survive another round of an infection, if there was to be one."

"This plant thing is really working you up, isn't it?"

"And it seems to be barely fazing you."

"I could collect a sample and take a little look at it, if that would reassure you."

"It would."

"Then I'll do that." Antfrost leaned over the meeting table and lay his paw on Bad's hand. "Just try not to think too much about it, alright?"

"How could I not?" Bad retorted. His tail was tying itself into knots. "I feel like the Egg era is repeating itself and I don't want to lose myself to it again. I don't want to lose anyone or anything ever again, especially to something like that."

Losing Skeppy, losing his friends, losing the Badlands, losing himself. History tended to have a funny way of repeating itself. He wouldn't let his corruption happen again. Never. Too much was at stake, not that it hadn't already been the first time around.

"We can't afford to slip up again, Antfrost."

This time there was no Sam to save their sanity and reputation. If they messed up monumentally in the positions they held now, their heads would roll with no questions asked. Their next error would surely be their last.

"Take the sample and see what you can find out from it," Bad decided, pushing himself out from his seat. He started to pace. "Then, we decide what to do from there. But this time, we're going to crack down hard on this issue, harder than we've ever done with any problem before. Is that understood?"

He could feel Ant's surprise stare burn through his back and he expected him to leap up and say something to try and bring the demon down. Instead, all he got in response was a small, "Yes, sir." Nothing more.

"Good." He could let himself breathe a little more.

"Bad, what I said still stands though. Try not to let it get to you."

"It's easier said than done."

"But try, at least. The upcoming week is supposed to be a happy one for everyone, please don't ruin it. Hold it back for Sapnap and Karl's sake. Can you do that?"

"I can try."

His claws dug deeply into his arm, so deeply they were close to piercing the skin. It sent his mind reeling back to a time full to the brim with crimson, a time where innocent blood and treachery oozed from every crack. A dagger's blade ripped down his back, tearing his shoulder apart and provoking a devastating battle garnished with blue fire, a crumbling cave and lost lives. The scar burned with phantom pains whenever something managed to circle his thoughts back to the events that transpired on that fateful night, which unfortunately happened worryingly often.

He didn't know how to stop it. He didn't know how to let go of the past. He wondered if he'd ever be able to.

But for Antfrost, he'd try. As he'd said, the week to come was meant to be a joyful one. Bad had to try and keep it that way.

It wouldn't be easy.

Chapter Five: Familiarities

"...In all my years on the sea, I've never seen anything like it—and we've seen a lot! We search for these things in our off-time, and yet even krakens and magical tridents were somehow easier to believe in than bird-women with perfect skin and magical voices. Of all things, the sirens are the ones we doubted the most, and yet their myth still scared us all enough to actually take precautions! And there was only one! I've never heard of a siren that actually approaches its victim. That was honestly bone-chilling. Thank the gods for the ropes. She was *physically* trying to drag him down herself when her voice didn't. They're far more aggressive than any of us could have ever thought. In a way, we were lucky that Sam was there as vulnerable as he was. The siren's attention was focused on him, but what if it wasn't? She could have attacked anyone, making anyone listen to her song by brute force. They're active, violent predators rather than the more passive ones we first thought they were. Melody's Pass is a death trap if a boat sails in unprepared."

"We should warn other ships," agreed the rescued captain that strode alongside her.

"Or a coastguard," Puffy pondered aloud. "We've just got to get the word out that the sirens are one legend that was largely and underwhelmingly recounted. I think sailors have grossly underestimated their cruelty in the past." The slash across her cheek still burned her skin three days later. "Either the creatures themselves adapted over time, or those who claimed they sailed in their infested passes were straight up lying about coming out the other side unscathed."

"It could be a question of honour. Sailors tend to be like that."

"Perhaps."

They continued walking for a bit.

The port was decidedly a little smaller than some they had docked at in the past, but still just as lively, maybe even more so. A dozen ships or so bobbed in the harbour. One of them belonged to Captain Puffy and her crew. Three others were the merchant vessels they had escorted through troubled waters. They, like many of the other galleons, were unloading their cargo. They cluttered the wooden piers with a maze of crates, boxes, chests and barrels, creating a labyrinth through which weaved countless sailors and merchants haggling deals or stretching their sea legs. Sea captains paced back and forth between the wares, talking with each other and their first mates and idly checking out their surroundings. Puffy did the same, although

not with the feigned interest that her peers seemed to have towards open, salted crates of glassy-eyed fish.

Instead, she let her attention wander beyond the harbour, up one of the cobbled avenues that ran down to it. Behind the seaside homes of light grey stone and thatched roofs strengthened with clay tiles, an entire city stretched out. Its streets climbed up the gentle slope it was settled on like grey veins towards a beating heart, overlapping and crisscrossing and disappearing behind rows of brick and mortar flesh. A couple of church spires and temple roofs jutted out a little higher than the rest of the buildings present, pointing up towards the clear blue sky like fingers and hands turned to the gods in sacred prayer. Above it all however—set against a backdrop of high, jagged mountains mottled with dark stone and patches of lush green—sat the true glittering jewel. The heart in question where all the roads led their travellers to. A palace, shining with a delicious, creamy glare in the sunlight, bright and brilliant. It hurt Puffy just looking at it for too long with its dazzling white accents glowing like rows of blinding stars right through her eyes.

She turned her gaze away and back to the fellow sea captain by her side, who had once again begun to talk.

"I do have to say though," he noted, somewhat amused, "it seems to me that either you place too much trust in your first mate or not enough at all to let him get into dangerous situations like that."

"Is there truly something as 'too much' trust?" Puffy asked, shrugging nonchalantly.

"Well, ships and their crews never do well with loose cannons, in both senses."

"I've known Sam for longer than I have anyone else," she assured the other captain, gently but firmly. "We've been through heaven and hell together, and we made it out alive despite it all. He saved my lives, and I saved his too. We were there for each other when no one else was. I owe him more than I could ever give back."

The sea shanties and flagons of spirits ran abundantly around the docks. Crews shared stories, drink and company alike, making friends of men and beasts they would never end up seeing again. Among the sailors that hurried to and fro, Puffy's eyes landed on one in particular.

He was standing beside the gangplank of one of the vessels, exchanging a few words with a fellow first mate. Unlike the other captains and their right-hand men strapped into their immaculate naval uniforms, his own—if it could

even be considered as such—was simple; a red bandana tied around his neck and a moth-eaten brown overcoat sewn up and mended time and time again over the years. His attire may have seemed wild and tattered, something that would have rather been worn by a ruthless rulebreaker than a respected sailor, but his posture suggested otherwise.

Broad shoulders rolled back in an almost regal fashion and a perfectly straight spine were remnants of years of stubborn and formal duties, ones that had taken such a toll on him that they had left perpetual marks in their wake. His hands were folded behind his back, yet another sign that never seemed to leave either.

His forest green hair and cheeks dappled with freckles of the same shade stood out against his pale peach skin, slightly more tanned thanks to the tropical climates they often navigated through. It made a few of his scars, new and old stand out. They only added to the picture of his past of back-breaking service to causes left to the jaws of Time in a land far away. He was battered and bruised, hardened by the elements, and yet still he was so gentle. She could just about make out the soft tone of his voice as he talked, as calm and rich as the gentle lapping of the ocean waves that rolled against the wooden hulls of the boats.

At one point, Sam unburdened a cabin boy of the barrel he was carrying, heaving it over his own shoulder with ease. He turned around, locking gazes with Puffy. The look in his eyes—the eyes of a creeper, with bright green iris rings drowned in black sclera—was ever so tender, so utterly tender and adoring.

"And I love him," she finally concluded, momentarily choked up by the warm swelling in her chest. "I love him, and I always will."

Sam gave her a little wink from afar, then got back to unloading the last few bits of their cargo.

"So in answer to your question: yes, I have given him every ounce of my trust."

The captain beside her hummed, then sighed. "You should count yourself lucky to have found yourself someone worthy of that honour. You can't always trust everybody, especially on the high seas."

Puffy had spent many years of the past in that exact same predicament. She did count herself *ever so* lucky.

"Well, Captain Puffy, this is where we part." The rescued captain moved in front of her and bowed deeply, then shook her hand. "The cargo is safe and

the crew on all three of our ships are alive, and it's all thanks to you. We will never be able to thank you enough for all your help. I thought that the Guardians were simply a legend made up by hopeful tavern talk. I was glad to see that I was sorely mistaken."

Puffy smiled and bowed back. "Well, we are very much real, I'm happy to say."

And with that, the rescued captain thanked her again, double checked that she still wanted nothing in return for her and her crew's services, and walked back towards his galleon. The last crates were being hauled off, and the crowd of sailors slowly started to thin as they headed into the city to rest.

Only her own crew was left, laughing and talking and joking around with one another across the brine-splattered cobbles and wooden decks of the harbour's seafront.

Michelle was among them, decidedly so much younger but acting and being accepted as if she was the opposite. She had changed so much in the years since Puffy and Sam had first found her in the Nether. It felt like entire lifetimes ago now. At first too shy to talk, she was now conversing with relative ease and a bright smile that rivaled the sun itself.

The only real reminder of her ten, tender years of age was when Sam swooped in and teasingly began to embarrass her, to which she groaned and tried to push him away as he showered her with affection. Even then, that didn't necessarily mean anything.

No matter how many years pass or how much they grow, a parent will never really cease to see their child as their little baby. Somewhere in it all, Puffy knew that she'd always remember the trembling arms that wrapped around her neck, the tight little fist tugging at her curls, the confused sneezes when they introduced her to snow for the first time and the endearing squeals of pure love that made her melt on the spot. Even when the change of air in the Overworld stopped the zombification process, even when she grew and had learned to communicate in more than a couple of words at a time, the memory of Michelle's rescue would always be there.

Their baby, growing and thriving, but still their baby after all.

"You, there!"

Puffy jumped and turned around as someone grabbed her shoulder, and found herself staring straight into the piercing slits of a stranger's eyes.

A cat—or some sort of feline; a panther, maybe—with a sleek black pelt leaned in closer, his whiskers so close they brushed over her cheek. Their tips burned like hot needles. She tried to take a step back. His pointed muzzle twisted his sharp, angular features into a tempest of suspicion and contempt, displaying canines and incisors that looked ready to tear the flesh off her very bones.

His eyes resembled more of a snake's than a felines, their amber glare bubbling with a deadly poison that spat out and hit its mark with nothing but a single, hardened stare. The curve of one of them was followed by the ridge of a half-mask, painted purple and cut so awkwardly that it could only have been to hide something particular and undesirable.

Everything about him screamed darkness and decay. It was the horrific kind, the shadows that shrouded and the rot that killed everything for good, not the ones that gently hid secrets and left room for rebirth in their wake. There was a silent menace in every twitch of his ear, bristle of his fur and rumble in his throat that made her want to run and hide, that forced her to believe in the monster under the bed again and fear the other gnashing terrors of the night.

She couldn't remember the last time someone had struck so much fear into her. Even Dream couldn't compare, and somehow that only made the situation more terrifying.

Taking a quick look down at the rest of him, distracted by the furious whip-like flicking of his tail, she noticed he was dressed up in a uniform that could only pertain to a royal guard of some sort, with the added additions of a purple cloak of choice and a few more weapons strapped to his belt.

The small garrison that followed behind him were dressed similarly, standing erect with their hands on their swords and lances. They eyed her with the same suspicion as their leader did, although with nothing close to the venomous stare on his face.

Nearby, Puffy saw the harbour's coastguard that she had only crossed once in passing. He was talking with one of the other guards, occasionally glancing over at her with narrowed eyes. A creeping vine of dread began to run up her body, but Captain Puffy proudly stood her ground.

And she tried to hide her shaking.

"Yes?"

The feline pointed to her galleon. "Is this your ship?"

His voice was dark and hollow, with the rugged edge of a crudely carved tombstone that sucked a little more life out of the world with every breath.

"Yes, it is." She forced out a smile and bowed gracefully. "Captain Puffy, at your service."

"It's not registered."

Taken aback, she rose again. "I'm... sorry?"

"You docked in the harbour with an unregistered vessel," the feline repeated.

"It's never been a problem anywhere else before."

He seemed to be purposely ignoring her in favour of scrutinizing the boat and its crew further. "It's quite an ornate one," he noted.

For such a dark and brooding individual, he certainly had a way with idle yet accusing small-talk.

He wasn't wrong there. Back in the SMP, when it had been built, both the Badlands and the Greater SMP had put in countless hours of work to make it worthy of its future captain. The figurehead was of a ram, carefully carved and detailed right down to every individual lock of wool. The railings were made of a lighter wood than the spruce hull; polished, engraved and exquisitely varnished, reflecting golden hints in the sunlight. The masts were sculpted to look like twisting tree trunks. It had been the five SMP nations' thank you and parting gift to the one who had dedicated so many years of service to them.

"It is," she agreed with a twinge of fond pride. Not for the first time, she thanked her friends, wherever they were now.

"It's very unusual to see such an expensive galleon manned by a group of untidy ruffians."

"That group of ruffians, I'll have you know, is my crew."

"The question still stands."

"The ship was a present from friends of mine."

"A present? Only royalty would have the money to give a present of that caliber to a simple sailor."

"And what makes you think that my friends aren't?"

Here, the feline shook his head and scoffed. "I know buccaneers when I see them," he said.

His poison found its mark. Puffy's blood ran cold.

"We're not pirates," she argued. "We're just explorers, and often escort merchant ships out of trouble and to their destinations." As further proof, she gestured to the three other ships surrounding her own. "We've never pillaged anything or anyone before."

"All the signs suggest otherwise, and I can assure you that we're not merciful to pirates on these shores."

At this point, her fear had turned into seething anger, even as his claws dug deeper into her shoulder blade. "There's been a misunderstanding! We are not pirates! Let me see a superior—*holy heck*, even the monarch of the realm!—and we'll clear this whole mess up."

She certainly didn't expect him to agree.

"The queen has better things to do than settle the fate of marauders, but I'm certain that she will take great pleasure in seeing what kind of low-life creeps into her ports unannounced. She might even give you the honour of a death warrant signed by her own hand."

"What seems to be the problem here?"

A new pair of footsteps approached Captain Puffy from behind. Another hand lay itself on her shoulder—banishing the clawed one almost immediately—and squeezed it lightly but protectively. She didn't even need to turn around to sense or see the thunderstorm brewing in Sam's eyes, nor the stern scowl on his own face as the feline continued to speak.

"The problem here is you."

"He thinks we're pirates," Puffy sighed.

"Oh, really?"

"Is that funny to you, sir?" asked the feline coldly.

"Absolutely not, *sir*," Sam replied, matching the feline's tone to petty perfection. "But I will ask that you speak to my captain with all the respect

she deserves, which is unfortunately much more than you appear to be able to muster up, I'm afraid."

Normally, Puffy would have appreciated the compliments and the help. As of now, she was silently begging for Sam to shut up. The feline's whole expression was souring by the second.

"It's alright," she tried to reason with Sam, her hand on his chest gently pushing him back a little. "He just wants to talk. I'll deal with this. I'll be fine."

"I'm coming with you."

"Only the captain is to follow," the feline growled sternly. "The rest of the crew is to be kept under strict surveillance."

"What—?"

"Sam, please." Puffy finally faced him fully, just in time to hold his arms back from the trident fastened to his back. "I'll just settle this whole misunderstanding and everything will turn out fine, I promise. I'll be alright."

The hand she had closed around his forearm tightened its grip and her thumb rubbed comforting circles into his wrist. Sam looked from her to the feline and his garrison. His expression hardened, as did his next words.

"If you harm one hair on her head—"

"Rest assured, she's in good hands."

A chilling "for now" remained unspoken. But Sam could do nothing. Puffy couldn't either. They were both only able to agree to the terms and obey, for fear a fight would break out that could cost their final lives and those of their crew.

"Go to the others, tell them what's happening," the captain made her first mate promise. "Keep them out of trouble."

Sam nodded stiffly, but she could read him like a book. He was still clearly not alright with letting her be questioned alone in a strange realm by strange and ruthless-looking soldiers. She wasn't exactly looking forward to it either.

He nevertheless complied and stepped back. Puffy was led away.

Back in the SMP, there had been a number of times where she had been stared at. Certain events as well as her relationships with certain people and heroism in certain situations put her in the spotlight. Perhaps some glances

were more favourable than others, but none of them ever came close to making her as uncomfortable as the ones she was getting now.

Citizens stuck their heads out of windows, doorways and stopped in their tracks as the garrison made their way up the streets, the sheep securely lodged in their midst. Whispers followed, as did rumours made up on the spot. Puffy pursed her lips and stayed quiet, seething silently in her corner. She pulled the brim of her tricorn further over her eyes and hunched her shoulders a little, trying to seem as small and as invisible as possible. In moments like this, she would have kept her dignity and posture intact, but she couldn't under the circumstances. She wouldn't add any more smugness to the disgusting and vile victory march they were dragging her along. She was being paraded around like an attraction, a rabid and exotic beast there to marvel crowds and to be laughed at and taunted. They could have simply escorted her quietly and discreetly, but no. The feline and his soldiers had decided to sprinkle in some misplaced pomp and ceremony with their loud, rhythmic marching that alerted everything and everyone for miles around. Their flags, spears and heads were held high. It was a revolting spectacle, and Captain Puffy wanted no part in it.

Yet, of course, she didn't have a choice in the matter.

The palace was drawing nearer, its white mass soon starting to morph into a far more detailed and defined shape. Towers and turrets jutted out from the polished marble edifice. Veins of light grey glinted like trickling streams of silver on the ramparts, entwining and climbing with the vines and thorns of the rose bushes planted either side of the gate. Beyond lay a large entrance courtyard walled in by decorative arches and cherry blossom trees. Two more guards opened it at their arrival and stepped aside to let the escort and their prisoner past.

The feline stopped and turned to one of the sentries. "Is the queen here?"

"Yes, she is."

"Good." He urged Puffy forwards with nothing but a warning glance. "Let's go."

She shot him a murderous glare in return, but held her tongue and obeyed nonetheless. They crossed the cobbled yard and arrived before a large pair of dark oak doors. The feline dismissed the rest of the retinue and knocked. Then, he pushed them open and ushered Puffy inside.

Judging by the choice of escort alone, Puffy had expected the monarch of the realm to be a cruel tyrant with a face to match the wicked and twisted desires leaking from their every pore. That couldn't have been further from

the truth. When the captain was brought into the throne room, she was taken aback. The old, crippled demon of pure evil she had imagined to be running the show was in fact none of the sort.

The queen was a slender little thing, bearing far more marks of childhood than growing age—although she couldn't have been too much younger than Puffy herself. The throne room was too big, or perhaps she herself was too small; either way, she was drowning in it. The only thing seemingly keeping her afloat was a soft and cheery smile that she was currently offering to two men standing beside her.

They both wore long white cloaks, and every rustle of the fabric sent a wave of sickly sweet herbs and healing concoctions towards the door. In stark contrast to the queen, their expressions were darkened by solemn shadows. The gloom even started to tug at Puffy's own will with its gnarled fingers, only adding to the already crushing weight of her predicament laid around her shoulders.

The healers whispered a few words to the monarch and bowed deeply with pursed lips. And still, she smiled brightly. The sheep could just about hear a few murmurs of thank you and then they were dismissed. Before they left, they poured the sparkling pink contents of a vial into a chalice that the queen promptly picked up and drank from. As she did, she looked aimlessly around the room until her gaze landed on the door.

"Ah, Captain!" she cried, quickly and unceremoniously wiping the corners of her mouth with the back of her hand.

For a moment, Puffy faltered. Was she expected?

She was proven wrong as soon as her escorting guard dropped to one knee, his hand crossed over his chest and held against his heart.

"Your Majesty," he greeted, then rose again. "We intercepted an unregistered ship anchored in the docks and are currently keeping a close eye on the rest of the crew as we speak. The vessel's captain, however, insisted on speaking with you."

"I didn't," Puffy quickly jumped in. "It was just a turn of phrase that your soldiers took far too literally."

The feline hissed and gave her a thunderous look, opening his mouth to angrily retaliate and even tear her throat clean out. The queen raised her hand to break up the fight. Surprisingly, despite the distance between her and them and the lightness of the gesture, they both complied.

"Arguing won't solve anything," she said, her voice loud and as clear as crystal. "We will resolve this civilly and diplomatically. First off, Corpse, take a step back."

Corpse—what an eerily fitting name—did so with a nod.

"Good, now please approach."

She beckoned to Puffy who followed with no qualms, tethered to her gentle order by fine, cobweb-like strings. She stepped a little closer, taking off her tricorn and bowing before the few steps leading up to the throne with a sweeping, dignified reverence.

"Your Majesty."

"Please rise," the queen offered. "Rise, and tell me what you want to say."

This was exactly what Puffy had hoped would happen, even in the midst of her growing fear when she was led up to the palace.

"Go ahead," the queen coaxed her, again with a smile.

"Your Majesty, my name is Captain Puffy," she began. "My crew and I are explorers, and help defenseless ships travel safely through pirate or monster infested waters. We were just helping three of these vessels in question dock when your forces intervened. Granted, our ship is not registered, but that's because we've simply never had the time to do it properly, and it's never posed a problem anywhere else before. We're not pirates and we don't want any trouble. I don't ask for much, Your Majesty, just that my ship and my crew be released and be allowed to leave your shores. My young daughter is on board, as is my partner. I don't want anything to happen to them. Please."

Puffy was the one who had dragged them away from a safe shoreline and out into a world of rolling waves and danger. She had to make sure they stayed safe. Otherwise she would never forgive herself.

The queen hung onto every word until she finished, then stood up. "Release them," she ordered.

Corpse spluttered. "What?"

"Release them. I think you made a mistake."

"Release them? On what grounds? They haven't proved or disproved anything, Your Majesty!"

"I can sense that she's telling the truth."

"You're prepared to risk the whole harbour and maybe even the whole kingdom because you think she's telling the truth?"

"Yes."

"Acquitting criminals on those grounds is how a monarch's position wavers and eventually weakens, Your Majesty—"

"There have been too many piracy-related executions in this realm already," she cut him off sharply. "I think we need to start enforcing a more tolerant point of view. Let the arrested directly plead their cases instead of assuming their culpability on the spot and making irreversible mistakes. We're level-headed enough to judge character rather than appearances, and I think she's telling the truth."

The queen spared Puffy a sympathetic look.

"Your vessel and crew are free to go, Captain Puffy, but my soldiers will still make sure that you keep your word and set sail as soon as possible."

She let out a sigh of deep and utter relief. "Thank you, Your Majesty. Not many monarchs would do what you did. You remind me of a king I once knew."

"Oh?" The queen smiled. "Which one?"

"King Eret of the Greater SMP," Puffy replied, knowing that the name would probably not ring any bells outside of the direct radius of the SMP itself. "He was as good a monarch as I have ever seen, and I'm glad to see they're not the only one of their kind."

"So you've been accused in front of other monarchs before?"

There was a twinge of a teasing edge in the queen's voice, a twinge that rubbed off on Captain Puffy. She smiled a little.

"No, not at all. It's a long story—a long, long story."

One that would probably span pages and pages.

"Perhaps someone will tell it one day." It was like she was reading her mind. Puffy found that strangely comforting.

"Perhaps they will."

The echoes of a commotion suddenly filtered in from outside, making her ears twitch. Both Puffy and the queen turned to the entrance to see what was going on. The doors to the throne room banged open and the shouts only grew louder, as did the smell of an angry cloud of gunpowder that Captain Puffy only recognized all too well.

Her stomach immediately dropped.

Oh gods.

A new prisoner was shoved inside, another guard keeping him closely in his weapon's sights.

"This one's the first mate," he growled. "He was stirring up trouble in the harbour."

"Well / don't appreciate you sticking a sword in my daughter's face," Sam spat back. That sharp tongued remark earned him a brutal blow to his back.

As he collapsed to the floor, Puffy was abruptly forced down to her knees next to him by Corpse, who seemed only too relieved to serve his rightful vision of justice cold and roughly again. No longer a diplomatic guest, Puffy was once again a prisoner and a pirate.

She rolled her eyes and glared at the troublemaker. "Nice one," she muttered under her breath.

To her surprise, Sam suddenly softened. "They were threatening Michelle. She was scared. I had to do something."

Puffy's chest tightened. If they weren't being watched so closely and brutally reprimanded for the slightest movement, she would have reached out to hold his hand. As it were, she was only left longing.

"It's nice of you to join us," the queen said. There was no mocking tone or bite behind her words. They sounded genuine.

Sam however didn't seem to get the hints, his mind apparently already decided when it came to the monarch. "Tell your guard dogs to back down," he demanded. "They branded us as culprits until proven innocent, what kind of policy is that?"

"Pirates are a problem around these waters. The authorities were given orders to take care of unregistered vessels and lead proper investigations into their crews. It's just protocol."

"Your so-called "protocol" had a guard threatening to cut my daughter's throat for daring to ask a question!"

The queen pursed her lips. "Did they now?"

She looked over to the feline behind Puffy with a sharp, accusatory glare. She heard him inhale deeply and straighten his posture. "We were following orders," he muttered.

"Have my orders ever taken precedence over common sense and morals, Corpse?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"Good. I don't expect them to in the future, understood?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Risking a look behind her, Puffy saw Corpse hang his head in deference. Even so, his hostility had barely wavered.

"That's all?" Sam was still livid. "You're not going to punish them for attacking a *child*?"

"They won't do it again."

"They did it once, to my own daughter no less, and I won't let that slide. I have fought countless tyrants in my time, Your Majesty, and I would happily do it again if needed."

He stood up abruptly and when his guard went to jab him with his lance, he grabbed it and shoved it away with such force that the soldier tripped. Puffy tried to grab her partner and pull him down, to no avail. Sam glared at the queen.

"I was the owner of the biggest and most advanced high-security prison in the world. I was warden to the worst villain to have ever lived. I know which punishments fit the crime."

"I'm sure you do, but we try to do things a little differently here. You must also know that power corrupts. I'm being careful. There's no use building an authority based on tyranny."

"It's not tyranny if it *fits the crime*."

"I understand that you're angry. I'm sure your child didn't deserve what happened, and we are truly sorry."

Sam went to open his mouth again, but this time Puffy was quicker. She grabbed his shoulder and roughly turned him around to face her.

"If anyone's going to get executed for a crime here, it'll be you," she hissed. "Listen to her. Give her a chance. I did, and things were going well before you barged in."

"But—"

"If you end up dying needlessly, neither Michelle nor I will ever forgive you. Stand down."

"Puffy—"

"That is an order from your captain."

Sam immediately shut up. He stared at her with a furrowed brow and wide eyes. She stood her ground and held his gaze until he backed down. He gave her a small, stiff bow and stepped away, a small indent in his cheek from where he bit inside. Captain Puffy took a moment to compose herself—ignoring the creeping guilt that wormed its way through her mind—and clasped her hands together.

"Your Majesty," she began, thankfully managing to grasp the reins and steer the confrontation back into more peaceful territory. "I apologize for my first mate, but I do agree with him. Your soldiers went to attack a child, and I doubt any supposed provocation she was able to muster up warranted that violent reaction. Now, you of course have the final say in the punishment, but you have to forgive us both for feeling strongly about the whole situation. Due to our past experiences..."

She trailed off. The queen wasn't listening to her. The once so sweetly attentive monarch had her gaze focused on someone other than Puffy, her pale face scrunched up in deep thought.

Sam was looking at her too. He peered closer, suddenly confused. "Do I know you?"

The queen stood up from her throne and despite strangled cries from her guards, made her way towards the "pirates" brought before her. Every step was featherlight—an enemy of the crown might even say weakened—and it looked like a breath of wind could knock her over, but still she kept her eyes forward until she was a couple of feet in front of Sam. Her gaze never

wavered, even when Sam straightened his posture to seem a little more dignified and imposing. His own stare never faltered either. Seeing them both face to face, so close together, struck something in Puffy.

It wasn't jealousy.

Both of them scrutinized the other as if they were strange little enigmas, little puzzles they were trying to crack and solve in one way or another. Puffy took note of the similar, bright intelligent spark in both their eyes as well, so similar it was eerie.

Finally, the queen spoke, "You remind me of someone."

"I do?" He seemed to be miles away, still engrossed in his own game of detective work.

"My brother." She took a step closer. "A little older than when I last saw him and somehow a little more creeper-like, but still him."

Her hand swept under his chin and to Puffy's own surprise, Sam let her do so. Her thumb gently ran over the side of his jawline, across a few of the smaller, almost indiscernible scars on his cheek. He didn't move, his eyes boring into hers.

Thoughtfully, she pulled away. "He disappeared when he was eighteen. I never saw him again..."

Captain Puffy watched the exchange wordlessly, not sure what to think or say or do. Then the queen reached out again and folded back part of his necktie. Among a cluster of green freckles sat a dark, circular birthmark, so small and insignificant that even Puffy had overlooked it countless times. Now, however, that small inconspicuous little mark seemed to mean everything to the queen.

"Sam?"

She uttered his name in nothing more than a whisper, tone laden with doubt but also undeniable hope. It was so hopeful that even Puffy felt her own heart lift up and brighten. The sheep's head snapped her head towards Sam. His entire face was lax and pale as the sound of his own name on the lips of a complete stranger finally sunk in. Or perhaps she wasn't a stranger to him at all.

"Sylvee," he breathed back.

She nodded. She hugged him.

Puffy suddenly realized then and there that their lives would never be the same again.

Let's go, my first time writing for Corpse and Sylvee! Lovely streamers with friendly ties to the DSMP roster, go check them out if you're interested in their content. :3

Chapter Six: A Past Melody

"It's really you..."

Sam didn't know who had spoken then. He spaced out completely, only brought back into the real world when a soft hand carded through the back of his hair. Snippets of the past rushed back to him with every stroke until he was drowning in them. Before long, everything else around him had faded away, everything except for the bittersweet feeling of his sister's hug.

A sister he thought he had lost for good.

There had been a time where he could have carried her fully in his arms. She still played with his hair in the same way she always had as a child of tender, innocent age. Since then, the child had become a woman. The hug, however, was the same. The feeling of her embrace was timeless.

But it couldn't be real. It couldn't! His sister, so far away from what was once their home? A chance meeting years down the line? It was simply unbelievable.

He didn't know if he had blanked or blacked out from the shock, but he was soon brought back to reality when Sylvee eventually pulled away. She stroked the side of his face, eyes brimming with the happiest tears he had ever seen in his life. Looking at her now, he had never felt so ridiculously stupid. She was there, this was her. Everything about the queen was his sister in one way or another.

He was an idiot not to have put two and two together sooner.

"I can't believe it," she whispered, choked up. "It's really you. Sammy, you're here!"

As he smiled, still in complete and utter disbelief, a tightness climbed up his throat. He wouldn't have been able to say anything without bursting into tears. He dove back in for a hug, squeezing her as tightly as ever, tight enough so he wouldn't lose her.

After all these years, his sister had somehow come back into his life. He wasn't ready to let go again.

The fantasy was briefly shattered by a rumbling cough from behind him.

"Your Majesty—"

"Corpse, leave us."

"But the pirates—"

"I said, leave us. This case is no longer yours to handle."

And Sam could only hold her tighter. He could feel another pair of eyes on his back, shocked and confused by the sudden change of events. He could have turned back and assured Puffy that everything was alright, but he wasn't ready to do that. Not yet. Not until he collapsed from exhaustion and his body forced himself to let go of his sister.

"I'm sorry."

His first proper words to her were the ones constantly engraved deep into the depths of his mind.

He could have said something, anything, to make her smile or laugh. Instead, he apologized. He apologized for everything he had done and for everything he hadn't. He could do nothing else.

"I should be the one apologizing," she laughed—so childlike and familiar—near his ear. "I'm afraid we didn't give you the best welcome. I'll make it up to you, I promise."

Sam almost sobbed. Even now, things hadn't changed. Sylvee always kept her promises. He could only attempt to and fail time and time again.

The inside of the castle was just as beautiful as the outside. The cream walls continued their ornate pattern through the maze of halls and doorways that made up the royal residence. Every room was finely furnished, some with a minimalist touch to the decor and others exploding with baroque ecstasy.

The motifs carried along out into the collection of inner courtyards dotted around. Each one bloomed with the vibrant colours and whimsical flurry of scents emanating from the many flower varieties that grew there; everything from heavy hanging laburnums to thick shrubs of azaleas running around fountain edges and pillars like stout labyrinth hedges. Some were close enough to the mountainside for the rushing rapids of the waterfalls to crash down in the background. Others were far more secluded and offered idyllic and quiet little escapes from everything and everyone.

Sam had always been one to design buildings and machines for their practicality rather than their aesthetic. Time on the wide oceans had given him a break from all that. His past attachments to sturdy and undecorated places had morphed into an appreciation for the pure beauty and fantasy the world had to offer. The palace was no exception.

It was stunning.

It was nothing like the ugly conversation Sam knew was bound to take place at some point.

"Father told us you were dead."

They were walking along the covered outskirts of one of the smaller gardens inside the walls, occasionally passed by servants and courtiers alike. They all stopped to bow when their monarch crossed their paths, continuously reminding Sam that Sylvee wasn't only his little sister anymore, but a respected queen too.

He felt a chill run up his spine at her almost accusatory remark. "In his eyes, I probably was. But to you all...?"

"What else were we meant to believe? You never sent any word."

"I did, to our mother. I thought she would have shared it with you all."

"She didn't. She was mourning you, just as we all were."

"I'm sorry, if I had known..."

If he had known, he would have tried to do something, anything, about it. He wouldn't have gone back, though. Anything but locking himself back up in the strict guilded chains he had painfully broken himself out of.

"Why did you leave?"

They stopped walking. Sam looked at his sister, and what he saw hurt him.

He saw her.

The bright ray of sunshine he had left behind so many years ago, now darkened by confusion and a sadness that seemed to gush through her like a river.

In true, sibling-like fashion, Sam's younger brothers and sisters hadn't been too thrilled with the arrival of a new baby. Sam, on the other hand, was ecstatic, almost as much so as his own mother.

The moment he had set eyes on his new sister, he felt his heart swell to twice its size. He doted on her as much as he could and watched her grow. He was there when she took her first steps. He indulged her phases of interest that varied from making flower crowns to writing stories about unicorns that lived happily ever after in the end. He was there for her when the stress of their parents' expectations and the stuffiness of the balls they attended were on the verge of giving her panic attacks.

No matter what, he was always there. He had promised her he always would be.

He was her brother, her best friend and her rock.

Even now, meeting and staring into the eyes of the woman she had become years later, he couldn't forget that fact.

Her eyes were the ones that kept a fierce, childlike hold on every magical spark, every ounce of hope, every promise he had ever made her. Yet now, as Sylvee had grown up, they had faded and changed.

The threads that wove the promises together had frayed—some had snapped. Her hopeful glint had dwindled and long-time clouds of grief had seemingly only just started clearing now he was here. Like a statue, she had weared and and started crumbling over time, and unknowingly he had let her. No explanation he could give would ever fix or justify that.

"Sam, please."

She was desperate for an answer, and it was one that pained him to give her.

"I was young," he finally replied. "I was selfish and I was thinking only of myself. I was desperate to get out of that life and I didn't think of what I was leaving behind, what mark would stain my place."

In a way, he still didn't. Now he was older, it was so much harder to simply do what he did. Now he was no stranger to consequences, regret and remorse.

"But why?"

"I wanted my own free will."

"And so did I," Sylvee whispered. "Why didn't you take me with you?"

Her question was so innocent and simple, an inquiry that only wanted a truth and nothing but.

Sam would have felt guilty if it wasn't for the horrors that had ended up taking place in the SMP. If his sister had lost any lives there, he would have never forgiven himself. In the end, it was for the best.

"I didn't know if I was making a mistake. I still didn't, even for weeks afterwards. If it had turned out poorly, I couldn't have you suffer for my mistakes. I was lucky in the end, but what if I wasn't? I couldn't risk gambling your lives away with mine. I couldn't drag you head on into danger that I didn't even know of yet, and in the end I'm glad I didn't. The life I ended up living had its ups and downs, but the downs were so much steeper than I could have ever imagined. I couldn't have let you live through what I did. You were safer where you were."

That was the whole truth, no matter how harsh and controlling it sounded. There was nothing else that he would say about it. None of it would feel right or sincere.

He was protecting her, in his own misguided way.

Although, maybe he hadn't. It was rare that a child of mediocre noblemen and bourgeoisie rose to become a queen of a realm as powerful and well-respected as the one she appeared to be ruling over now. He knew full well that she herself had something of a story to tell.

"How did you end up here?"

"Well, when you left, things were tense. Father was clearly trying to forget you and did whatever he could to keep moving forward. Our siblings married and pleased our parents. One by one they tied knots and alliances until only I was left, the youngest. Before long, those same burdens that had been unloaded onto you all fell on my shoulders. For a while, I was scared. I was alone. Everyone had flown the nest except me. Eventually, Father and Mother found me a suitor. A king, although that didn't matter. Titles never

mattered to me. I just wanted to be somewhat happy with the arrangement and I was pleasantly surprised. I always thought that I would be stuck with someone I'd despise, like some of our brothers and sisters were, but he wasn't like that at all. He was kind and courageous, and some of the maids even called him handsome. He was a very nice guy, more of a friend than a lover, and that suited us both fine. We made it work, and we were genuinely happy with our life together."

They left the cloister-like courtyard and came out in one of the palace's many halls. On one side, large glass windows framed with emerald green silk curtains opened out onto the town. On the other, almond white walls were lined with fine oil paintings, some of vanities, some of scenes, and some of people. Sylvee stopped in front of one of them and looked up. Sam followed suit.

Staring down at them both from one of what seemed like the most recent canvases was the figure of a monarch. He had a youthful, albeit forgettable face, but he wasn't bad looking either. He simply looked like all the other young men rolled into jewels and silks who had been paraded around his parents' lavish balls and soirées. Young, fresh and part of a long, monotonous line of children just waiting to be arranged into their forever affairs. Even so, in his painted face, Sam could see kindness and gentleness. A small stroke of white in each carefully painted eye bore proof of a tame ego and proud courage. Even made up of nothing more than streaks of paint across a canvas, the king seemed to be exactly as his sister had described him.

"He died in a battle," Sylvee said, her voice breaking. "The relations with one of our neighbouring realms have always been shaky at best, and a couple of years ago we were forced to wage a war against them. We won, but at a price. Our people lost their king, and I lost my dearest friend."

Sam's tongue tied. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be. It's shit."

It was indeed. There was no other word to describe it. Untimely deaths were shit. Their aftermath was shit. Grief was shit. It was all just nothing but shit. Poets and writers could try to dress it all up however they wanted, but their thinly crafted drapes were only that—attempts at dampening and concealing what it all really was.

It was *shit*, and Sam had been through too much of it during his lifetime to use any other word.

His single life had never been so prominent, so precious. He felt it burn on his arm.

"I've lost so many dear friends," he confessed suddenly, "and I lost a son."

"A son?" Sylvee's head snapped up.

Sam's heart began to twist, turn, beat and sink. "It's complicated."

He didn't really want to talk about it, about him.

That was the first time he couldn't.

When he did talk about Tommy, it was with the people who knew him and loved him as he once did. It was with people who shared his deep pain. For the past few years, that person was Puffy, and he could be vulnerable with her without question. But now, faced with his sister who knew nothing about his new life, speaking of Tommy seemed almost unfathomable. He would be trying to accurately describe a stranger to another one, and try to make them love the boy as he did. It would fail, obviously.

To love and grieve Tommy as he deserved to be, you had to have known him.

Sam could never paint an accurate and detailed portrait. It would be impossible, so impossible that it would be an insult to even try.

He did nonetheless.

"He soared to greater heights than anyone his age ever did. I just wish he could have spread his wings further. I wasn't his father by blood, and I never signed any official adoption papers, but I did everything I could. I loved him, I protected him, but not enough. None of it was ever enough. I couldn't even protect him from that damn arrow..."

His last words came out choked and almost inaudible, and he cleared his throat in order to his the tremor in his voice.

"His name was Tommy, and he died just as the sun rose. I wouldn't be where I am today without him. I wouldn't love or live the way I do if he didn't teach me how to. Blood bonded or not, he was my son, and I miss him every single day."

He expected his sister's gaze to linger on him, but was surprised. She was still staring at the painting and seemed a million miles away.

"I wish I could say I understand, but I can't," she said. Her brow was furrowed in a strained expression he couldn't read all too well. "We never had any children."

"Did you want to?"

"I would have thought that I would, but in truth... I don't know anymore."

Her unknown expression only deepened, digging new and darker lines across her complexion. Sam didn't know what to say or what to do. He simply held his tongue.

"He—Tommy, I mean... He sounded like a remarkable kid."

He was.

He still is.

He stared at the portrait for a while more. He heard Sylvee cough. It started off small and almost indiscernible in passing, then became louder and more violent. Sam tore his attention away from the image of the dead and to the living one who looked a mere two steps away from joining him. He tried to steady her and keep her together as she spluttered a storm out into a handkerchief.

"Sylvee?"

The fit calmed down and his sister pressed the tissue to her lips. "I'm fine," she gasped.

Nonetheless, Sam didn't let go of her until he was sure that she'd be alright—and that, he couldn't say for certain.

"Are you sure—"

"Sam, really. It's okay."

She eventually straightened up and cleared her throat, folding the handkerchief away. Sam hoped that the couple of red spots he glimpsed on it were only tricks his eyes were playing on him. She flashed him a smile.

"A freak plague spread through the kingdom a couple of months ago." She folded the handkerchief into a neat little square and put it away. "It definitely hit our people hard, but most are recovering. We're fine. It's just taking a little longer for it to disappear completely than the healers thought it would... It's all good."

"Um, yeah, sure." Skepticism weighed down his reply.

The subject was changed quickly. "How long are you planning on staying?"

"Originally, only a night or two to restock our provisions before setting off."

And now? He didn't know anymore. Reuniting with what seemed to be the last link to his family must have changed something, right? There was no way he could simply brush it all off as if it was nothing. But then again, after their hostile welcome on the realm's shores... He didn't know what to think of it, and he felt like it wasn't his place to decide.

"Now, I don't know."

Everything was muddled. Everything was confusing.

"Stay," his sister pleaded, her gentle touch landing on his forearm, "at least for a bit."

"|—"

"There's a ball coming up in about a week or so from now, and it would mean the world to me if you could attend. I know that those kinds of parties aren't up your street, but I swear that it won't be as stuffy as you might think, and it could even be fun and I'm sure my court would really want to meet you and—"

She was running short of breath and Sam could see that. He chuckled, one hand resting on her shoulder and the other holding her hand. "Easy there, breathe."

She did, then laughed as well. "I'm sorry, I'm just really happy that you're here, that you're back in my life. I've really missed you..."

He gave her a fond kiss on her forehead. "So have I, and I would give so much to catch up properly with you."

"Does that mean you'll stay?"

"I don't know yet, the decision isn't mine to take."

"Of course." She beckoned over a nearby guard by one of the doors. "Tell Captain Puffy that I take back what I said about leaving the shores as soon as possible."

The sentry nodded and walked off to carry out the queen's order. Sam was still unsure.

"Your own Captain won't be too happy."

"You mean Corpse? He's a sweetheart, really. He just tends to be a little overprotective now and then, that's all. He takes his job and duty very seriously."

Sam chuckled nervously as the explanation began to circle too close to home for comfort. "I definitely know what that feels like."

"Your Majesty." Someone came to join them, an old man. The stench of healing herbs and sulphuric alchemy clung to him like persistent cobwebs. "You need to rest."

Sylvee sighed. "I feel fine—"

"Your Majesty, *please*."

Now it was less of a request, more of an order, and the queen obeyed. Before she left, however, she looked back at her brother.

"Hey, Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"When you yelled at me in the throne room, you said—"

"I said a lot of things, Sylvee, and I'm sorry."

"No, I mean you said that you had fought tyrants before and that you owned a prison, and I was just wondering..."

"Why?"

She nodded. "What happened to you out there in the world?"

He didn't even know where to start. "A lot of things," he eventually replied. "I'll tell you when the time is right, I promise."

Sylvee smiled. "I can't wait."

Then, leaning back into her role as queen, she bowed to him. He bowed back, unable to hide the glimmer of pride that sparked within him at the thought of his little sister soaring as high as she had.

She left his side soon after and before he knew it, Sam was left utterly alone. He didn't quite know what to do with himself. Leaving the palace seemed out of the question, as did squatting the same hallway for too long, and so he decided to explore a little. He could feel the guards' stares on him whenever he entered or left a room, specifically on his pockets and sleeves. He tried not to act too suspiciously and kept his hands to himself.

The only time he didn't was in one of the palace's many drawing rooms. It was quite an empty one, bathed in mundane shades of dark blue and dove grey. There were no guards at either of the doors. It was as if the room was completely and utterly disregarded by all. The only thing worth noting was the grand piano taking pride of place next to a window. It was made of dark, sleek mahogany. The rays of the setting light dimly shining through the glass panes rested softly over its hood. Small clusters of dust danced across them, cascaded over the keys and landed on the velvet of the seat before it. Its cushion was perfectly curved, a telling mark of its complete and utter disuse. There was no sheet music to be found.

Nevertheless, Sam sat down and let his fingers brush over the keys. He pressed one down. A deep, throbbing do echoed out into the empty, forgotten room. It was loud, almost deafening in the absolute silence of his surroundings. He waited for someone to come running and tell him off, maybe for a guard to come and snap the lid shut on his fingers. No one did.

And so he began to play.

His hands skillfully flew over the notes, however not without a couple of stumbles and hiccups here and there. He weaved an old, familiar tune together with nothing but the phantoms of a muscle memory he thought he would have forgotten by now. It was one that was reminiscent of cobbled streets winding up the side of a hill, packed on either side by rows upon rows of houses, with musicians and poets and artists happily creating beauty around every corner. It was a fantasy explored in stories and in the history of the Old World, and unfortunately was a fantasy that had died along with it. The closest things left to it were the books, the paintings and the music. They were only fragments, but sometimes that was all one could hold on to. Sometimes, the broken shards were what paved the way to miracles. Playing that melody now, Sam felt like he was bringing something back to life—both the past and the darkened room itself.

It was obvious that the years of strict, "virtuous" training he had been subjected to as a kid were still paying off, even decades later when he was a completely different person and had no use for those kinds of skills anymore. Part of him was still somewhat grateful that he had kept it all. As the bars and notes unravelled, so did his mind. Dark thoughts and concerns tumbled out and flew away with the music and before long Sam felt his entire being

drift off, as if he was on the doorstep between falling asleep and staying awake.

A door creaked open at one point, letting the music echo into the hallways beyond. Still, he didn't stop, nor did he raise his head. He just kept going, even as he felt the velvet seat beside him dip. Someone sat down. He continued to play.

With no sheet music and no proper memory of his lessons, he didn't know when the song finished until it did. He snapped out of the musical trance by himself once his fingers faltered on the final chord. The artistic fantasy vanished once again, evaporating into the air along with the last few notes. Everything in his mind that he had willingly let escape soon tumbled back in, curling around and around and around again like coils of heavy rope.

He didn't move for quite a while. Neither did the newcomer sitting by his side. As the room around them died again, their words began to live.

"I didn't know you could play the piano."

"I forgot I could."

He let his hands fall from the ivories to his lap. Silence soon reigned supreme once again. He had known from the very start who had joined him. He didn't need to look across to confirm it. The warm and intimate feeling of proximity as well as the fresh aura heavy with brine and open skies was familiar and oh so telling.

Puffy coughed. "So, we've been invited to stay a little longer," she began. She sounded uncertain, even anxious.

Sam hummed his agreement.

"That was... not what I expected to happen," she continued.

"Same here, and..."

"And?"

"And I think we should, for a bit at least. It'll give us a bit of a break."

He finally turned his head and looked over. Puffy raised her gaze from the floor and stared at an invisible point somewhere above them.

"Yeah," she agreed, letting out a heavy sigh. "A break."

"It would give the crew some time off."

"It would."

"And we can finally find someone to repair that rickety part of the deck and the cabin door in the meantime."

"We could."

Sam was no fool. There was something about Puffy's quiet, almost toneless voice that didn't sit quite right. There was her apparent refusal to look at him, too, that worried him.

"Is something wrong?"

"It's just been a tiring day."

"We don't have to stay if you don't want to—"

"No, Sam. We should." She finally turned to him. "You're right. This could be a good chance for a break, and you need to spend time with your family. I mean, you've found your sister after all these years—that's beyond incredible. We both left our homelands without so much as a goodbye, don't waste this opportunity to rekindle a link. You'll regret it if you do."

Even if her overall attitude to the situation at hand had seemingly brightened up, he knew that she herself hadn't.

"Puffy, if you don't want to stay—"

She interrupted him mid-sentence. "I do."

"If this is just because of me—"

"It's not. I love seeing you happy, but I also agree. A break is what we really need."

Again, Sam knew that it wasn't the whole truth. There was something else underlying her words, something a little reluctant and saddened. It painted every syllable grey and cast shadows over her smile. He wanted to probe further and ask more questions. He wanted an honest answer that could clear the storm clouds and truly heighten her spirits again. Even so, he didn't. Her eyes reflected the complete exhaustion she had said was plaguing her, and he had to admit that he felt the same way—not only from the hectic day itself, but in general. A life on the sea was not without its

difficulties and risks, least of all for a captain and her right hand man at the head of a crew of Samaritans.

"Okay. We'll take a break. But if at any point you want to go, we can, alright?"

He laid a hand on hers. She nodded solemnly.

"Alright."

She shifted closer to him and lay her head on his shoulder.

His worry swiftly vanished behind a featherlight veil that softened his tense demeanour, favouring a gentle affection that lightened the air around them.

The tune that came out this time was brighter and happier than the last. It was less of a heartbreaking love letter to a time long gone, and rather a playful ballad to a sunny and splendid one to come. He couldn't remember its name, nor who it was by, or when exactly he had learned it. It just flowed out from him and with Puffy leaning against his shoulder, also starting to relax, it felt like magic.

Chapter Seven: Exhaustion

The bakery had closed up later than usual. Velvet hadn't been in all day, with the repairs in the Badlands taking precedence over making muffins, so Niki had taken over everything. Naturally, the workload was larger than usual. Between baking and manning the counter, she barely had a moment to breathe.

But she enjoyed the rush. She always did.

She didn't mind constantly kneading dough, icing treats or idly chatting with her customers. She didn't mind the occasional late nights either. The stars were always there to greet her when she came out. They always lifted her spirits, even on bad days.

They were out tonight. Her eyes were glued to them as she made her way around the back to lock up the storeroom. The heavens were smiling down upon the SMP, and the warmth in her heart and the fuzzy clouds in her head made her grin along with them.

She only looked down and away when she got to the door and the handle wasn't there to greet her waiting hand. It was further away than she had remembered it being. She tugged it down, and an empty click broke the silence of the night. The door creaked open on its own accord.

It was ajar, and Niki knew she wasn't the one who had left it like that. She never did. She always double checked everything.

Pocketing her keys, she pushed it all the way with her foot. The moon's milky rays washed over the floor, defining the crates and sacks of ingredients with eerie, deep unmoving shadows. Niki took a step inside.

"Hello?" she called out. "Who's there?"

As she expected, she received no answer, vocal or otherwise. She took the redstone lamp off its hook on the wall and flipped the switch. The moonlight was pushed aside by a beam of copper-coloured light. The redstone flame flickered, and the whole storeroom was soon bathed in an aura so similar to a roaring fire that all trace of the nighttime cold was immediately banished.

There was no sign of a forceful break-in. Everything seemed in its place at first glance, and nothing was amiss. That was until Niki noticed a few specks of what looked like grains of shining white sand in her immediate peripheral. Squinting closer and picking up a few on the tip of her finger, she realized it was sugar. Looking even closer, she also realized that two bags of it were missing from the back shelves. And when she really began to investigate even closer, she noticed a larger trail that ran along the length of the storeroom and out of the door.

Sugar wasn't a rare ingredient in the slightest. She had other bags aplenty and the desert plantations would have been more than happy to supply her with more, as per their trading agreement with the Greater SMP. Losing two sacks was nothing. She would survive and the bakery would continue to thrive. It was also the middle of the night. Her arms and legs were aching and she could feel the slight twinge of a headache coming along. Her bed had never seemed more inviting.

There was no reason for her to sniff out the trail left by the Grand Sugar Thief. A million factors agreed with that fact.

Only one wasn't in its favour. Unusually enough, it was that one fact that actually tipped the scales.

Her curiosity over the nature of the thief—and more importantly why of all things they would rob her of her sugar stash—was too strong to ignore.

A good night's sleep be damned, she was going to get to the bottom of this.

She closed the door behind her and double checked the lock. The moonlight and the redstone lamp illuminated the thin, almost indiscernible trail sprinkled across the ground, creating a glittering path of minuscule diamonds that led away from the shop and into the nocturnal landscape beyond. With unwavering courage and a sense of amateurish, detective-like intrigue spurring her forward, she followed it.

In the dark, the trail wound and rushed across the landscape like a trickling silver stream. It disappeared down the slopes of the Greater SMP and crossed its border. That was the first time that Niki faltered. She really had no excuse to be sneaking in and around Badlands territory at night, and she knew full well the excuse of looking for Velvet wouldn't hold up. Even so, she stepped over the limit anyway and continued tracking. The sugar path continued out into the moorland, following the length of the border until it hit one of the flower forests. It disappeared through the bushes. Before long, Niki did as well.

The Badlands' forests were some of the rare places in the SMP that were just as inviting at night as it was in the day. In the sun, the flowers bloomed in all their glory, the birds sang and the fae danced. At night, the brush was alight with the starlight spilling through the leafy canopy, thousands of fireflies twirled in a mesmerising ballet and the gentle snoring of the magical folk living there came out as beautiful lullabies that carried on the nightly breeze like melodies inscribed on music sheets. The silver trail only added to the beauty of her surroundings in its own odd way. The redstone lamp she brandished in one hand attracted an array of colourful, fuzzy moths. The gentle tapping of their feet and wings against the glass was as minute and endearing as they were. Niki took a moment to simply watch them flutter, smiling when one of them crawled onto her hand.

"Hello there, little one," she whispered as it wandered over her palm and between her fingers. It was like it was following an eternal path with no destination in sight or mind, just as she was right then. "You don't happen to know where I can find a sneaky treat thief, do you?"

It didn't reply and flew off, taking the rest of its multicoloured friends with it. They twirled with the fireflies for a moment more in a furious chasing waltz between light and light-lovers. They disappeared a moment later.

And Niki heard a noise.

It was a small crunch of a foot stepping on the undergrowth, so common a noise that she originally thought it was her own footstep. But when she froze

and she heard it again, she knew it wasn't. It was clear that it belonged to something or someone else.

Then came the faint hiss of falling sand, or something that sounded like it—dry, cascading down with a hushed shimmer.

And finally, a voice.

At first, it did nothing but hum a light little melody, one so dainty and elegant and warm that it was close to reawakening spring. It was a breath of unabashed forest life itself, rejuvenating and refreshing.

Before Niki could lose herself to the gentle sway of the tune, it cut abruptly. The music was replaced by words.

"There we go! Let's see if you like that, hey?"

Niki approached with silent footsteps and hid behind a nearby tree. She peeped cautiously around the trunk, receiving a sleepy kick from the forest dryad fast asleep and merged into the bark.

Beyond the line of trees and bushes lay a cramped glen. The trees' canopy above stretched all the way over it, forming a leafy mosaic of a dome that barely let in the moon's rays and the stars' watchful eyes. Its surroundings were plunged into a velvet purple hue, darkening the vegetation into greying greens and dulled pastel colours. It was still somehow light enough for Niki to make out the figure that fluttered around in the middle.

She was dressed in featherlight clothes of pink chiffon, with a tulle skirt that fell in wild bunches like the crumpled petals of a flower. The thorned vines of a red rosebush wound around one of her arms, its blooms so vibrant and crimson it was as if they had been slathered with a fresh coat of paint.

A flower fairy.

Niki hadn't met many of them in her lifetimes. The only known clusters of the fae folk known in the SMP had taken up residence in the Badlands' flower forests and they rarely emerged to mingle with the rest of civilization.

But this one, oddly enough, she knew by name.

Hannah.

Sam used to speak fondly of her. That wasn't to say that he didn't chuckle a little too, and go on to tell them of a few of her misdemeanours. Whereas most fae folk were calm and dainty, Hannah was much more like the rose

thorns that clambered up her arm—wild, stubborn and cursed with a rebellious streak that may or may not be prone to sowing problematic seeds, leaving a prankster's carnage wherever she went.

It seemed like theft was also part of it now.

Niki spied one of the two missing sugar bags lying to the side, limp and empty. The other was in the fairy's hand. She poured out the contents onto the floor, joining an already enormous pile of sugar that was now wasted. She then tossed the second sack away and licked the remaining grains off her fingers.

"That's all of it! It tasted delicious, I'm sure you'd like it."

Hannah was not talking to Niki. Her head and attention was directed downwards towards a point further away. It was invisible from Niki's current hiding place. She could only try to guess with a furrowed brow and a whirring mind.

Nothing happened for a while, the only sound filling the air being the hummingbird flutter of Hannah's pale, glass-like wings beating against the forest breeze. She crossed her arms and waited. Her foot began to tap against the air and her bright smile soon became a puzzled frown.

The fairy fluttered downwards and crouched beside the mounds of sugar. She pouted and poked one. "Come on, give me something to work with here..."

"Maybe you should try mixing it with something."

Niki stepped out from behind her tree. The fairy squealed in surprise and shot up into the air again. The rose vines wrapped around her tightened, their thorns retracting suddenly like a cat's sharp claws. She held her arm out, hand curled into a fist and ready to swipe her natural daggers at her if she stepped any closer.

Niki did just that. "That's what sugar's usually used for, not to be randomly dumped on the floor in the middle of the forest."

Hannah's thorns only grew in size.

Niki raised her hands up in a defensive motion. "I'm only saying."

"How did you find me?"

She reached out and flicked a segment of the faint sugar trail with her foot. The grains sparkled against the toe of her boot.

The fairy dropped her arm. The thorns retreated. "Ah."

"I'm Niki."

"Yeah, I know who you are. You crashed the Red Banquet."

Seems like a certain kind of reputation preceded them both.

"You slashed my wings in the fight."

She stretched out one of them. Some of the facettes were a little damaged by small holes from the crimson vines that once bound them, and a large tear from a diagonal cut. The damage had been patched up by a new layer of transparent filament that protected and scarred them. It still didn't erase the past.

Niki swallowed hard. "Oh."

There had been so many casualties during that masquerade that she had lost count and lost all the images of the faces she had fought. It all blurred together. Hannah was the first to come out and remind her to her face, the first detailed scuffle that had jumped up since.

Even so, there didn't seem to be a grudge behind her remark. The fairy had just simply stated a fact and that made Niki trying to keep an authoritarian presence so much harder. Now instead of facing a thief she was facing one of her victims. Maybe the sugar theft was merely karma doing what it did best. Fate was only giving back to the deserving.

It seemed such a trivial thing to do, however; a few pounds of easily replaceable sugar to pay for literal mutilation. It was far too low. That made her wonder if there was perhaps more to it. If Niki knew anything, it was that fate was not something to be toyed with. She just had to just flow with it, no matter how rough the tides were.

She let it come, and she went with it. "Why do you need all that sugar?"

As she asked the question, Hannah's sparkling eyes lit up. All of their past, and even the tense meeting conditions of their present, were cast aside in favour of her grabbing Nikki's hand and dragging her closer to the mounds.

"I'm experimenting," she whispered, her sudden burst of giddy excitement giving the whole thing the feel of a child's special secret—most likely involving something she shouldn't be doing.

Soon enough, Niki found out exactly what that was.

Further away from the piles of sugar sat a strange carpet of dark and sparkling cerulean moss, entwined with the tufts of grass and silver pebbles strewn all around. It seemed to have crawled out from the bushes and now had stretched partway over the ground and had left a spiked, almost crack-like trail in its wake. It was still, so still that it resembled the shadow of one of the twisting trees that surrounded the clearing, or a childish streak of paint slashed across a painted landscape. It seemed harmless, and yet it was completely out of place. Otherworldly, almost.

"I've tried to speak to it, but it won't answer."

"It's dead?"

"No, it isn't. It's very much alive. It listens, but it doesn't say anything back, which is weird; if anything, it's usually hard to moss and lichen to shut up!"

Niki tilted her head and peered closer. She didn't know what it was at first, second, and even third glance, and that was exactly what chilled her so much about it. She had never seen anything like it before. "So, that's why you're feeding it?"

Hannah hummed in agreement. "I tried manure, earth, leaves, fruit, and it still won't do anything. I decided to try something different."

"Using sugar."

"Yep."

"*My* sugar."

"Listen, it was going to get eaten in one way or another anyway."

"And yet it's still not doing anything, and now my ingredients are going to waste."

"Give it a chance, it might just be shy."

Niki's bed was calling to her like it had never called to her before. She still didn't answer it just yet, and decided to humour Hannah. She stayed and gave "it" a chance. She crouched down on her heels next to the fairy,

propped her elbows on her knees, and waited. She waited a long, long time. The night was growing colder on her back, and the wind whistled warnings to the sleepless through the trees. The moon's light was still faint, but constant, as was the darkness. As was the motionless carpet of sparkling... whatever it was.

Time passed, and still nothing happened, despite Hannah's frequent encouragement and fumbled excuses. Niki had always been a patient person; it was a trait that had helped earn her a beloved reputation and warm smiles that greeted her anywhere she went. Tonight, that patience was growing thinner and thinner, until it snapped.

"I'm done with this joke."

"Niki, wait—"

She huffed and hauled herself to her feet, her hand clenched around Hannah's arm. Immediately, the threatened thorns swelled to twice their size and before she knew it, had buried themselves into the palm of her hand, snug and warm and agonizing. As quickly as she had touched them, she jerked away with a cry. Blood poured out of the deep tears in her skin, trickling down her wrist. A single, quiet drop dripped down to the earth below and sank into the perfect, pristine mound of white sugar. That single drop of blood changed everything.

The cerulean moss sprung to life. No longer a still streak, it started spreading at a record pace, covering one whole half of the clearing in the blink of an eye, so fast that Niki didn't even have time to scream a second time. She thought that it would keep spreading their way and swallow them up along with the rest, but instead it concentrated all its efforts on homing in on the large pile of sugar. It had been waiting there for an hour or so, and was gone in only a matter of moments. A grating churning sound as it digested every last grain made her sick. Then, as suddenly as it had leapt into action, it stopped completely and stilled, once more another worldly, glittering and undisturbed mass.

No one else in the world had witnessed it, except for the baker and the flower fairy who stood in absolute silence. Their expressions betrayed nothing but shock, the kind that was permeating their brain, emotions and entire body. They, like the moss, were rendered as still as statues, and as completely silent as such.

Niki's other hand came to clutch her bleeding palm tightly against her chest. She tried to stammer out a semblance of a remark, an answer, even just an exclamation. Nothing came out.

Hannah on the other hand, just like the moss and lichen, suddenly bloomed into conversation.

"Oh my gods, did you see that? It reacted, it reacted! To blood, of all things, and it detected a single drop from so far away! Like a shark! It must be carnivorous, then, but even then, I—"

She cut herself off abruptly and before Niki knew it, the fairy was by her side and gawking at her injured hand.

"Are you okay—?"

Niki stepped out of reach. She couldn't risk letting any more blood fall, even if that meant her shirt was ruined beyond any form of cleaning and whitening.

"Do you need any help? We fae are very good with healing herbs, I'm sure—"

"No." Niki took another step away from everything; the sugar, the fairy, the monstrous growth now once again frozen in time. "No, you've done enough damage for one night."

She looked down, unable to bear the hurt gaze in Hannah's eyes. It was uncalled for. She barely knew her. However, calling her out was all Niki felt like she could do. There was only one way she could regain a semblance of control over everything that was happening, a certain sense of direction that hadn't slipped for years now. Looking bloodthirsty danger in its face again was familiar, and it had never been more terrifying. She had to put her foot down in one way or another, or let herself be beaten down again and again.

But the final battle could wait, at least for now. As long as she kept her blood to herself, the growth would remain dormant. She could fight it later. She was too tired, of everything and everyone.

Niki turned away and started walking away from the clearing. Everything passed by in a blur and her head was pounding. She still somehow found a sliver of her voice, and called to the fairy behind her; "I expect you to be at my bakery at dawn tomorrow."

"Me?" asked Hannah. "What for?"

"To pay for your theft."

"Fae-folk don't use money."

"I know, and that's why you're going to work the debt off."

"But—"

"The bakery. Dawn."

And before any more protestations reached her ears, she stumbled back the way she came. She barely made it over the Badlands border without tripping over her own feet. Fear and exhaustion clouded her mind fighting a raging battle where none emerged the victor and she was the undisputed loser. She had no more energy left to drag herself home by the time she reached the Greater SMP, and instead staggered to her bakery and collapsed on a pile of freshly delivered flower sacks a nighttime courier had left around the back. It was hard, it was uncomfortable, but at least she could lie down.

At least she could still see the stars.

At least she was far away from whatever that thing was.

And for now, that was enough.

Her hand hurt like hell. She didn't even have the energy to clean and bandage it properly. It would be bad if she didn't, that she knew, but she couldn't bring herself to get up anymore.

It was during moments like these that she'd find herself missing Puffy.

Puffy would help her up. Puffy would assure her that everything was alright and if her words failed, Puffy would lie down as well and watch the stars with her.

And somewhere in it all, there was a bit of grief over Wilbur too.

But mainly Puffy.

Wilbur, she had disposed of willingly. Puffy, not so much, and that was what made it all inevitably harder to bear.

Perhaps a romance hadn't worked out between them both, but a friendship certainly had. That was what she was missing right now.

Perhaps Puffy would have reeled Niki back a little, deterring her from getting mixed up in the antics of the cheeky fae-folk. Or if she hadn't, maybe she would have at least dealt with the whole thing differently.

Niki knew that there was no point in falling into the clutches of wishful thinking, because in the end that's all it would remain.

So she stared up at the sky. The stars smiled back. No longer lanterns of cheer that lit up the darkest night, their joy when staring down at a young, bleeding woman was now misplaced. They were not optimistic, they were uncaring. Selfish.

Her hand was still bleeding.

She got up and went to finally do something about it.

The rest of the day had been strange to say the least. Captain Puffy was brought before the queen for a second audience, this one in a much less formal way and place. Her wish to stay was heard and welcomed, and preparations were made forthwith, not to everyone's delight. Captain Corpse's ever-watching, narrow gaze still burned brightly against her back. She was instructed to return to her ship, attempt to explain the crew the situation and give them all leave for the time being. Again, Corpse was closely following every one of her footsteps, so closely that Michelle felt the need to hold her mother's hand a little tighter on the way back to the palace.

He seemed to always be there, acting as her darkened retinue, her eerie shadow, shackles tied to her ankles. He would probably try to control her breathing if he was given the chance to.

Even that very evening, when she wanted nothing more than to curl up beside Sam and sleep her worries away, he was there, putting his clawed paw in everything once again.

"Follow me."

"Excuse me?"

"You and the kid, follow me."

Sam stepped in front of his family. "What's going on?"

"Security protocol, Your Highness. They are to follow me."

"Absolutely not. We're sticking together—"

Puffy was tired. Too tired. She didn't have the will to fight back anymore.

"Sam, it's fine."

With an imploring gaze, she silently begged him not to argue. He didn't. Neither of them were happy about the whole thing but for the first time in forever, they didn't fight back. Puffy had a feeling that Sam was just as exhausted and lost as she was.

After a quick goodnight—the quickest Sam had ever given them—Corpse sharply directed them through the open door of a bedchamber, somewhere at the other end of the castle hall. Puffy ushered Michelle through in front of her.

Then, before she herself managed to set a single foot inside, Corpse caught her by her arm and dragged her backwards.

"You may be closely acquainted with Her Majesty's brother," he hissed into her ear, "but that doesn't make you any less of a pirate. Permitting you to stay in the palace was a mistake. If it was up to me you would be swinging from the gallows."

She tried to brush him off, but he yanked her back to him. His narrowed amber eyes pierced through her own.

"I will not compromise the safety of Her Majesty of the kingdom because of an unexpected family reunion. I will be keeping a very close eye on you during your stay, Captain Puffy, mark my words."

Puffy's jaw clenched. "Is that a threat?"

"It's a promise."

He let her go, and he disappeared into the chamber next door.

Puffy had kept a level head and a fierce eye throughout the small confrontation, and yet the guard captain's words still haunted her. They, along with painful indents his claws had pressed into her arm, had left deep marks. They were the kind that wouldn't just disappear after a single sleep, just like how the phantom pains on her neck were still burning years later.

She still rubbed at them on occasion, the memories of murderous fingers and vines alike still fresh. Only recently had she started to tolerate the occasional kiss or two over their scars, and only when those kisses came from one person in particular. It wasn't much, but it was at least something worth noting. There was a little healing going on there, and any scrap was good enough for her.

"Ma?"

She turned around. Michelle had crawled out of her bed, the covers still drawn over her shoulders. She stared at her mother with bleary eyes, tilting her head to the side as she watched her fingers anxiously caress her neck.

"I can't sleep," she said.

Puffy's hand dropped back down to her side. She moved away from the window.

"Do you want me to tell you a story?"

Michelle shook her head, looking down at her feet. "Could I sleep with you tonight?"

She didn't even have to ask.

In a matter of moments, Puffy had tucked her in on one side of the canopy bed. The bedchamber was undoubtedly smaller than some of the others in the palace, but it was homely nonetheless. A fire was crackling in the chimney, the blankets and covers were softer than anything she had ever touched before, and the views—even at night—were dazzling.

"Where's Pa?"

"He's a few rooms across."

"Why isn't he here?"

"It's complicated."

"Are you fighting?"

"Michelle, honey, of course not! What makes you think that?"

"He's not here right now, and he said goodnight very quickly."

Puffy sighed and lay down next to her daughter, popping herself up. Her elbow sank into the pillow beneath her. Now eye-to-eye with Michelle, she felt like she could have the first true and honest conversation of the whole day.

"Sam and I are more than fine," she told her with the most genuine smile she could muster up. "We're not fighting, and we still love each other very much. What happened today was just unexpected, and we're both still very confused about it all. It'll take a bit of time to adjust to, but we will eventually. We're just figuring things out."

"With Her Majesty?"

"With Her Majesty."

Puffy still didn't exactly know what any of it meant. Whatever the case, she had a feeling that it would be something that would extend so much further than their short stay in the kingdom.

"Is Pa a king?" Michelle asked with the magical awe-filled eyes only a child could have.

Puffy couldn't answer that. She said nothing.

Instead she combed her fingers through the young piglin's fur. She watched fondly as she yawned and snuggled closer to her.

"That kitty is weird," Michelle eventually mumbled under her breath.

Puffy stifled a laugh. "The kitty, huh?"

Michelle nodded, frowning. "Why doesn't he like us?"

"Sweetheart, it's not that he doesn't like us—" *He doesn't like me.* "—he's just worried for the queen. He's doing his duty. That's what guards do."

"Wasn't Pa a guard?"

"A sort of guard, yes, but that was a while ago."

"He wasn't like the kitty, was he?"

Puffy thought carefully about her answer. "Not when he was off the job."

"And when he was on it?"

"That... It was a little different. Sometimes we let our duties consume us, but we can bounce back. We can heal. Your father did and I'm sure that one day, that "kitty" will too."

Above all, she was there to reassure her daughter but somewhere, she knew that she was also trying to reassure herself. People changed, but people also stayed as they were. Usually and unfortunately, it was the good ones that would turn, and the others would stay the same. But she had also known some, once villains in her eyes, that had changed for the better. There was always hope, even if it kept her up for the rest of the night.

Sleep had finally found Michelle, but it was still struggling to even brush Puffy. She lay awake for two, three, even four hours afterwards. Everything she wanted the night to erase still twisted and turned inside her mind, like twisted creatures searching for a way out of their cage and gnawing at morsels of her soul when they couldn't.

She couldn't bear it and at around three in the morning, she shrugged a shawl around her shoulders and slipped out of the room.

The hallway, so grand and inviting during the day, was cold and eerie in the dead of night. Shrouded in shadows, both ends were nothing but darkness, making it seem endless. The tapping of her hooves against the floor echoed all around her, and every breath she let out made her shiver. She was careful not to wake Corpse and tiptoed past his door, but booked it down the rest of the floorplan until she reached Sam's door.

He was still up, judging from the candlelight under the crack in the threshold that flickered with every passing shadow of his pacing feet.

She reached her fist up, and stopped. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

She faltered.

She pulled away, rubbing her thumb over her knuckles. She stared at the shadows for a while longer.

Warmth was right there. She didn't necessarily have to say anything; neither of them did. The need for a loving embrace warranted no explanation.

But the cold corridor reeled her back.

She didn't go to Sam. She didn't return to Michelle.

She wandered. The rest of the palace was asleep, just as she should have been. Some rooms and halls were still as inviting; others made her tremble and take detours. Guards that passed her gave her brief glances, but said nothing. They didn't stop her, although she was certain that they'd report her nocturnal whereabouts to their captain in the morning. She was too exhausted to care anymore.

She didn't exactly know where she was going, nor how to get back to where she was. She kept going forward, until she finally decided to push open a pair of double doors and stumbled into the palace temple.

It was probably the most imposing room of the palace thus far. The ceiling was higher than any other she had ever seen, vaulted and made of silvery grey marble. The same coloured stone ran down to the floor in the form of polished pillars, holding up a myriad of carefully painted fresques and stained glass windows. Two rows of ornate pews made of spruce wood lined the checkered floor, running down towards an altar raised on a higher space separated by a small staircase of a few short steps. The lights were still on, burning flames in shallow copper dishes.

Her feet dragged her forwards, down the center aisle towards the altar, with the same solemn rhythm as every ceremony tended to demand. She collapsed halfway up the miniature staircase and gave up. She stared at the stained glass windows above her.

They depicted gods, men, beasts, creatures good and evil, all bound together by the pure power of the Universe.

Neither the Universe nor the gods never demanded full and complete worship, but the mortals who didn't believe in them were considered complete fools not to do so. There were many of them, so many that it was impossible to count. They tended to work in their own separate corners of the world, and so no one could list them all no matter how hard they tried. Their manifestations and divine intervention, however, had been numerous and undisputed. They were always watching. They were real.

Therefore, a little prayer was welcome from time to time.

And maybe, if they were feeling generous, they could answer her.

Puffy was just looking for a sign—any sign—that told her she was in the right. That deciding to stay for a bit wasn't a mistake. That everything would be alright.

It came, eventually.

"Hello?"

Puffy looked around. The dark silhouette of a woman tiptoed down the length of the temple. A generous, bursting bouquet of hyacinths, calla lilies and viburnums was stuffed in her arms, the whole arrangement somehow bigger than she herself was. Dark brown eyes sparkled behind the petals, staring quizzically at the captain.

In a strangely familiar way, she reminded her of Niki.

Puffy quickly scrambled to her feet. "I'm so sorry, I was just leaving."

"No, I should be the sorry one! Please, stay. I didn't mean to disturb you. Her Majesty just likes fresh flowers everyday, and I wanted to get this fresh bunch in before they started to wilt, and—"

She came closer, blowing a hanging stem out of her view, then suddenly stopped. Behind the bouquet, Puffy watched as her jaw dropped.

"Oh my goodness!" She rushed to dump the flowers in two nearby vases. "Captain Puffy?"

The sheep flinched. "I see I'm becoming quite infamous around here."

"No, we've met before!"

"Have we?"

"Well, not necessarily face to face, but we fought together. In the SMP. I used to live in Kinoko Kingdom."

That was a coincidence—dare she even say a sign—if she ever knew one. She peered closer at the woman. With long chestnut hair, purple and white gardening attire and a cat's ears and tail, she could have been from anywhere. Animal hybrids of all different shapes and sizes and species were present everywhere, including in the SMP.

She could have been a passing face Puffy had given a welcoming smile to once long ago. One she had rushed by in battle, or accidentally bumped into during a drunken celebration. She could have been an enemy or an ally. She could have been someone, or no-one at all. Her name didn't ring a bell, but something else about her did.

Somewhere in the vague, hazy pits of her memory, Puffy recognized her. There was a link.

"My gods," she breathed out.

In shock, and in relief in the knowledge that she wasn't completely stranded in this strange place.

She had so many questions and so many things to say—to a complete stranger, no less. A complete stranger that she somehow knew better than most of the other people on these foreign shores.

But for now, she couldn't say much. Except one thing.

"What's your name?"

"Tina," the woman replied, her smile bright and cheerful.

"I'm sorry I didn't recognize you."

"To be honest, I wouldn't have either if I was you. We both moved in very different circles."

Puffy's entourage had mainly consisted of people in positions of power or high esteem. From kings to presidents, young heroes to legendary, battle-scarred outlaws, she had fought beside them as frequently as she had against them. She had even gotten a god to do her a favour. Her twinings with power, whether it be through friendship, blood bonds, romances or even rebellions had been tight and numerous over the years.

Tina, on the other hand, didn't seem to have so much as a scar. Her skin was spotless, there were no shadowy bags under her eyes and her smile hid nothing but the purest of careless joys. The final battle must have been her only one.

Differing circles indeed.

"I've never seen anyone here so early in the morning."

Puffy looked up. The sun's rising rays were already glowing through the stained glass windows, completely outshining the candles and the lamps along the walls and in the niches. She hadn't realized how long she had been there. Two, maybe even three hours had gone by in the blink of an eye. Dawn was starting to break. She groaned, exhaustion washing over her once again like a tidal wave.

But above all else, the entire palace would be waking up shortly.

"I need to go," she said, preparing to make a run for it, "otherwise—"

"Otherwise Corpse will be out to get you, huh?" Tina laughed when Puffy turned to her fearfully. "He won't. He's a bit scary, yes, but he can be a real sweetheart when he wants to."

"That's clearly not when I'm involved, though."

"He'll come around, trust me."

Puffy couldn't do anything but agree and hope for the best. She turned to leave again, then stopped.

"I'm sorry we didn't get to talk much," she apologized, desperate not to seem rude.

"That's fine. If you're staying here for a bit, you should come and visit the palace gardens," Tina suggested brightly. "I'd love to show you around!"

And with that invitation, Puffy smiled to herself. Perhaps she wasn't completely alone or outcast. Her predicament might not be so bad after all.

The gods certainly worked in mysterious ways.

Chapter Eight: Rumbling Thoughts

He was no fool—he knew full well that he had a life before this.

It had been tarnished by war and bloodshed and tragedy, of course, but it was a life nonetheless. It had even started to get better at one point. It was a stable one, dare he even say happy. Happy enough. He could have stayed behind with it and been somewhat content.

What stopped him from doing so were the shadows, the painful memories that never really came to pass and swallowed him whole. They became worse once the realms he lived near began to move on. The shadows grew louder and louder until they were completely unbearable. They forced him to push away those who cared for him, to isolate himself far from everything like a hermit. They kept him shackled to the small grave on the mountain top for hours on end, mindless and frozen. They taunted him at night, blaming him ceaselessly for tragedies he had had no control over. They never left him alone.

With a taught throat and choked words whenever he'd try to talk to someone about them, the best course of action was for him to leave.

His long-time grief had finally pushed him over the edge, and the free fall was exhilarating.

Granted, it was easy. Too easy, cowardly even.

If he had tried a little harder, maybe he could have had a happy life moving forward.

In less than a few days, he was more productive than he had been in five whole years. He collected the last scraps of supplies from the crumbling remains of a cabin he hadn't bothered to look after, freed the starving hounds into the bitter wilderness, bid cryptic goodbyes to the few he'd regret leaving behind, then laid a final present on the snow-covered tomb before leaving the tundra—and the realms—for good.

He had no plan, no map, no destination. He did nothing but wander over old, forgotten roads and realms. He travelled from town to town, kingdom to kingdom, ocean to ocean. He never stayed anywhere more than a night. He spent no time sightseeing. He appreciated very little of his surroundings. The freedom his predicament offered meant nothing to him. He avoided civilization when he could, and slipped in and out of them quickly when he could not. He hunted for his food, lay upon beds of his own making, and walked wherever his feet took him.

As time went on, his search for a reason behind everything dwindled until he was nothing but an aimless traveller. An aimless survivor, rather. His few still skilled and defined actions weren't for pleasure, they were only for survival. Instincts overcame conscience. He ate, he slept, he journeyed on. Rinse and repeat, day after day. His tools, blankets and clothes began to wear and tear. Most evenings, he simply stared into the fire or up at the stars. There was nothing but a hardened, blank expression on his features nowadays.

A nomad with no route, no plan and no purpose. He forgot himself, and he didn't try to find him again.

Even his name became foreign to him.

He was a phantom of himself, made up only of silence, bitterness and loneliness. He was all but dead. He had been since the day of the battle.

And then there was a night. It started off like all the others—with him staring into the smouldering embers of his fire, reflecting on nothing—and ended with the break of a dusty dawn. That same dawn brought the start of his revival along with it.

It was all triggered by two, simple words.

'Hello, mate.'

A small twitch of his ear and a blink of his eyes broke the frozen façade he had held all this time. The treeline ringing around the clearing was shrouded in darkness, slowly squeezing the comfort out of his little camp. Nothing stirred. Time had trapped everything in a statue-like state, everything except him.

And the voice.

The longer the quiet dragged on, the fainter his certainty of having heard it became. Yet its tone was as clear as day, still echoing in his ears. It was a voice he wouldn't have forgotten so soon. It was one he'd hold onto his entire last life and one he had wanted to hear again more than anything.

Now it had spoken again after so many years, however, his blood ran cold. Colder than the morning wind, colder than the tundra, colder than the eternal sleep the voice had somehow managed to free itself from.

Because as much as he had wanted to hear it again, it was impossible. Its owner was dead.

His throat was dry from what felt like centuries of disuse, and his first word was a name of one he loved so dearly, whispered like a prayer.

"Philza?"

'It's good to see you again.'

It came from nowhere and everywhere at once. It hurt and soothed him. It broke and fixed him. It sledgehammered through dams and built up sturdy walls around his thoughts. It sent every part of him on a dizzy roundabout of a ride. It burned everything. It doused everything. It...

"How... how is this possible?"

'I never thought I'd say this, but you can thank Dream. Him, of all people! Imagine that! The Revival Book wasn't just about necromancy, apparently.'

He looked around, standing up on shaky legs. "Where are you?"

'I'm not where you think I am.'

"Phil, where are you?"

He was searching for a wisp of white, a ghostly flutter of two dark black wings, even just a gust of playful wind to billow up his cloak and toy with his fur. The world was still silent and unmoving and all phantoms with it.

'I told you, I'm not here.'

"Show yourself."

'I can't even if I wanted to.'

He grabbed his sword and held it aloft, something that he hadn't been forced to do for a while. Someone was playing a trick on him, they had to be. He was ready to tear them apart.

'Still as cautious as ever, aren't you, old friend?'

"I said show yourself."

'I can't.'

In any other situation, this would have been a show of cowardice from an enemy trying to dupe their way out of a certain death. He never believed any of them, and he had dealt with them all accordingly. Mercy was a rare gift he didn't give out all too often. It was only for the deserving, the ones the voices in his head considered weak and pathetic enough to risk sparing.

It was not for those who only pretended to be out of fear and regret. This voice was none of the sort.

He lowered his weapon, and a ball began to rise in his throat. "Please," he begged quietly.

'I wish I could.'

He discarded his sword to the side like no more than a piece of waste. It took him a while before he built up the courage to speak again.

"You really are here, then?"

'I guess I am. This must be strange for you, huh?'

The voice clearly had no idea.

"Phil, why are you here? Really, why?"

'At first, I just wanted to see you again, but now I feel I should stay for so much more. My dearest friend, what have you been doing to yourself?'

For the first time in forever, he looked down at himself. His body was a battlefield. Tattered clothes hung from his frame like limp flags. His slightly greying fur had only worsened over time, with bald patches leaving his multitude of scars and battle history on full display. His once bulking mass of muscle had thinned until the only thing clinging onto his skeleton was his pelt. He was unwashed and unkempt. An impending feeling of vulnerability crept up behind him. He could sense it perfectly, and he was simply waiting for it to pounce.

What had he been doing to himself, Philza asked?

"Nothing," he realized sadly. "Nothing at all."

'Oh—'

"Don't," he grunted out in a warning tone. He had already cried all his tears, and he wasn't about to slip up again. "I know what it looks like, but I'm fine."

'You're fine, are you?'

"Perfectly."

'You've always been a terrible liar.'

He couldn't stop his mouth from twitching up into a dim semblance of a smile. "And you've always been way too pushy for your own good."

'Alright, alright!' The voice chuckled. 'I'll stop.'

"No," he found himself abruptly saying, face falling again. "Don't."

He wanted familiarity. He wanted to pretend for a moment that everything was back to the way it was. To pretend—just for once in his godsforsaken lives.

It seemed like the voice shared his thoughts.

'You don't have to pretend, you just have to believe.'

He drew his knees up to his chest. "It's not that easy."

'I know.'

"I... I don't think I can."

'Maybe not alone. That's why I'm here, Technoblade.'

His name, so unfamiliar to him now, grated painfully on his ears.

'I'll be here every step of the way.'

He felt like that would only dig the trench of grief deeper, no matter how full his heart would be as it did.

"I don't think that would be wise."

'Come on, mate, when have I ever been sensible?'

And to his surprise, that actually made him laugh. "Never," he agreed.

'There we go, then. I'm staying.'

"For how long?"

'Who knows? That all depends on you. Time means nothing to me anymore.'

"You're putting a lot of faith in me, Phil."

'Of course. I always have.'

He didn't follow up, not at first. He did however build up the strength to go and relight the fire. It swelled up into a blazing tempest, roaring more than any of his other previous ones ever had. He sat down again. He poked the flames with a rogue stick.

"It's good to hear you," he confessed.

'It's good to talk to you.'

"I never got to say goodbye."

'I know. I'm sorry.'

Everything he had been desperately trying to push down bubbled upwards once again. He couldn't say everything he wanted to, and yet he couldn't risk wasting any time. For all he knew, he didn't have long. Then he'd be alone again. He had to at least try, and yet he couldn't bring himself to.

All of it felt like a dream, and he knew how dangerous those fantasies could become. He didn't want to fall into their trap, no matter how utterly inviting it was. Still, he didn't want to chase the phantom voice away. As it had said, its stay all depended on him. Despite everything, he didn't want it to go.

'You don't have to talk yet if you don't want to.'

He closed his eyes.

'It's alright, I'm here.'

Maybe Philza was, in some way. But he didn't want him as a voice. He wanted him as he was, as he was always meant to be.

He wanted him alive.

Chapter Nine: Dawnbreak

Sam hadn't slept.

That wasn't something that happened anymore. It had been a while since insomnia had hit him. Oftentimes, it was chased away by the rolling ocean waves and the soft lullaby sung by the heartbeat of his partner sleeping next to him. Even with the ocean's frequent dangers, there was little for him to worry about at night.

But after locking himself in a strange room in a strange kingdom populated by even stranger faces, all unknown to him except for one, it was back. He had forgotten how terrible it was.

The bed was too big and too cold. There was no familiar warmth except for his own. The moon's rays basked the chamber in a frozen glow, only reminding him how alone he was.

He couldn't lie there in such frozen solitude. The last time he had, he was bleeding to death. Although the wounds themselves had healed, the scars hadn't disappeared.

He couldn't stand it. He got up, lit a single candle and paced the night away.

The flame flickered with his troubled thoughts. Since leaving the SMP, they were often light and hopeful, the kind that made everything around him seem so beautiful and perfect. That night, however, they grew heavy again, heavier than he was used to now. Memories he had thought he had locked away for good came back to haunt him. He had forgotten how utterly crushing they were to bear.

He thought of his sister, of his parents, of the titles and riches and prestige he had left behind in his childhood—and the more he thought the more he walked.

He paced back and forth. He closed the curtains and hid himself from the moon's unwavering stare. He took out the ring and fiddled with it. He wasn't even thinking of the potential proposal anymore; it had become more of a fidget toy than anything.

Although, he was so on edge that if Puffy happened to walk through the door he might have very well just popped the question right there and then.

At one point, he almost did.

Sam heard her outside his door around three or four in the morning, and he had wanted nothing more than for her to knock and come in. He had been so close to walking up to and opening it himself. Neither of them would have to say anything—even just laying eyes on her would ease him a great deal.

But there was silence. No one knocked, no one called his name. The hoofsteps faded away as quickly as they had come, and once again, he was isolated.

He stayed up and alone until morning inevitably broke. He didn't stop pacing and he didn't so much as glance at the door. He barely saw the sunrise. It was his sister who finally dragged him out of the bedchamber, with a noisy entrance and a whirlwind of excitement in her wake.

"Come on, sleepyhead! Rise and shine!"

Sylvee grabbed his hand before Sam even had the chance to protest—or even say "good morning" back—and she whisked him out of the room. She dragged him down the corridors, past servants and courtiers alike. Dressed in less shabby clothes than he had forgotten he owned, Sam realized with a twinge of uneasiness that he fit in rather easily with the rest of the royal court they crossed.

Sylvee was laughing and chattering all the way. Sam couldn't help but smile, once again remembering that he was reunited with his little sister. Underneath the grown woman and the crown she bore, she had barely aged a single day.

"Someone's in a good mood," he remarked.

"Of course I am!" She turned back to him, her hair flying like drapes of golden silk around her. Her eyes laughed and sparkled along with it. "I have my brother back!"

And he had his sister. He couldn't have been happier. He briefly let his worries trickle away. He even started to lean into the brisk yanking of Sylvee's excitement and began to truly marvel at his prestigious surroundings.

At one point, he paused in front of one of the many portraits lining the walls. It was one he hadn't remembered seeing on his first brief wander around the

palace—which was fitting, because he barely recognized the man depicted in it.

It wasn't a man so much as a boy, with golden brown hair and forget-me-not eyes that matched Sylvee's own.

Sam stared, amused. He didn't remember posing for it in the first place.

Sylvee scooted to a halt beside him. "Surprised?"

"A little," he admitted. "This used to hang by the stairs, right?"

The top of their childhood mansion's grandiose staircase, where the pride and joys of the family were displayed. It was a spot reserved for those who had the brightest futures in their parents' eyes.

It only made sense that Sam's effigy had been taken down eventually.

"It did, and I asked to keep it before they burned it. I couldn't let you go." His sister glanced across at him, looking him up and down. "It's quite out of date now, though. Maybe we should give it a few touch-ups."

"You're right, it doesn't nearly capture the size of my muscles."

With a scoff, she elbowed him in the ribs—her gesture filled with love rather than malice. "Gods, were you always this vain and annoying?" she sighed. "You know perfectly well what I mean!"

"I'm annoying, Sylvee, not a complete idiot."

"Sometimes I do wonder. So, are you going to tell me why it looks like you swallowed a creeper?"

"Funnily enough, you're not too far from the truth already."

But of course, explaining that whole foolish incident wouldn't be that easy. He had the recollection, he had the words and he had the voice, but the Universe insisted on the fact that he didn't have the time.

Further down the hallway, a door creaked open.

"Your Majesty? The council is ready for you."

She grabbed her brother's hand once again. "Come on, we can't miss this."

Sam laughed sheepishly and tried to shimmy away. "I'll just wait outside the door."

"Nonsense, I want to introduce you to my advisors! They're probably dying to meet you."

That was much further from the truth. As soon as they set foot in the meeting room, silence fell. The council in question wasn't so much as displeased to see him as they were thoroughly surprised. All the eyes that turned to them were soon followed by sidelong glances of puzzlement.

"Advisors of the royal cabinet, may I introduce to you my brother, Samuel," Sylvee announced brightly, stepping aside and urging him forward with a smile. "He will be joining our meeting today as an honoured guest."

Sam was tongue-tied, not knowing whether he should have prepared a speech, or wing it, or stay silent. He opted for the latter, and merely gave them a somewhat stiff bow of greeting. It was enough.

The council bowed their heads back, some mumbling polite welcomes as they did. It was still not enough to hide their confusion at the sudden visit. Chances were they didn't even know of him in the first place, not even from word of mouth and idle court chatter. The feeling was mutual. Sam had no idea that he would be dragged into a cabinet meeting first thing in the morning either.

He tried to keep his head up rather than down as he followed his sister to her place at the far end of the table. He found himself seated to her right, next to Corpse who scooted his chair out a little to make room. The feline merely flicked his tail as a sharp greeting.

Opposite Sam sat another council member, this one decidedly younger than most of the others around him. His eyes were wide, bulging even, exactly like a frog's. His skin was visibly moist and a little greener than most. A happy little croak escaped his throat when Sam nervously smiled his way.

He, along with Sylvee, seemed to be the least fazed by Sam's sudden presence among them. Corpse still retained a faint air of wariness, and it began to spread to the rest of the council around them.

"With all due respect," one advisor began, "the matters discussed here are very delicate, and aren't for just anyone's ears—"

"Anything you can say to me you can say to him," Sylvee replied, softly but firmly. "He was in charge of his own kingdom once—"

"Nation," Sam corrected, hiding his rude intervention with a little cough.

"—and knows the rights and wrongs of running a government."

Another council member jumped in; "I doubt he knows anything about *this* kingdom, though."

Sam's thoughts exactly.

"I know," the queen agreed. "He can bring a fresh new view to the discussions at hand."

She stared at each of her advisors in turn, lightly daring any of them to contest her again. They all fell quiet. Sam was both in awe of his sister's authority and her stubborn gentleness in retaining it.

"Good. Now—" She rubbed her hands together and rifled through the neat stack of papers laid in front of her, stopping momentarily to cough into a cotton handkerchief. "—let's get started."

Almost like clockwork, the rest of the council did the same. Only Sam didn't move, the tablespace in front of him completely empty. He elected to simply sit back and stay quiet for the time being.

The meeting officially began.

"Anything to report?"

"A pirate ship is currently docked in the harbour with Your Majesty's permission. We are currently stationing most of our army in the town to watch the crew carefully."

Sylvee responded to Corpse's salty remark with a warning look. The feline said nothing in return.

"You will withdraw them all," she demanded. "They are our guests, not our prisoners. Keep only a small garrison if you must."

"I'm only doing my duty, Your Majesty," Corpse replied in a mutter, but Sam caught him jotting down the order nonetheless.

"Good. And, harbour aside, have there been any other things to report?"

"A patrol intercepted a rival patrol a little too close to our border for comfort."

"How close?"

"They were walking over it."

"Ah."

"We sent them off amicably, although they still didn't seem happy about it. It's only a matter of time until they tell their king."

The queen sighed. "We'll schedule a diplomatic dinner if we have to, maybe include an invite to the ball. We can't have tensions building up again over something so meaningless. Anything else?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, Captain." She looked at the others. "Any other reports?"

The rest of the council shook their heads.

"In that case we'll return to the matter of the treasury."

Sam noted the nervous looks exchanged between the advisors, looks so obvious that he was certain even his sister had noticed. Her smile slipped.

"I'm guessing that there's been no progress, right?"

"Not quite," piped up one of the members, sounding completely defeated. "There has been, but it's slow. At this rate, our financial situation will only become stable in a decade or so, and if tensions are on the rise again we may not have time to finance another war."

They were soon supported by another advisor. "The hit of the last one is still fresh. The late king—gods bless his soul—was a practical man, but we have to finally admit his emergency economic plan has completely backfired. It would have worked in a time of complete tranquility but the Blue Plague shattered all of that and left an even bigger dent in the coffers, as well as in the population number. And I don't mean to alarm you, Your Majesty, but once winter comes around our wheat stock will no longer be enough to make up the difference. We could be looking at a complete financial depression. Raising taxes is our only option."

"No," the queen cut in, holding up her hand as her face scrunched up in thought. "We are not going to starve our own people. If the need comes to be, we'll look through the palace inventory and sell what we can. We can also appeal to sympathetic realms for loans. We'll find a way, but we will not

make our people pay for the poorly carried out diplomacy and broken peace treaties of their monarchs."

"And have you looked into the redstone?"

Once again, his mouth ran a little faster than his mind. Sam was faced with room-wide shock, although now it was over something so much more than his mere presence.

He cleared his throat and leaned back. "Excuse me, I didn't mean to interrupt."

"No, no, that's what you're here for." Sylvee gave him an encouraging smile. "Go ahead."

"I was just wondering if you thought about branching out and fully exploiting the redstone ores," Sam continued, a lot more warily, raising his voice and his gaze.

The familiarity of past council meetings started to return to him and he found his footing once again, three years later.

"What ores?"

That single, two word question was the one that told Sam he had just struck gold—well, a precious ore close to it.

He pushed himself out of his chair and walked over to the windows behind the queen's chair that gave out onto the mountains behind the palace. He could hear the council crane their necks to watch his every move. He pulled one of the thick velvet curtains a little further aside, then pointed at and traced the red lines of dusty ochre red criss crossing across the rocks—strange geological anomalies he had noticed in passing the day before.

"*Those* ores," he explained. "Redstone is a power source that is used to create and power pretty much any kind of machine you can think of and build. The ore itself is ripe with stored electromagnetic energy from the earth. Once pressured from all sides, that energy turns into a red, powdery ore, much like how heavily compressed coal turns into diamonds. Those streaks in the mountainside are created when dense concentrations of redstone ores bleed through stone or earth. It makes them easier to find and mine. Redstone is highly sought after by both private engineers, small companies and the redstone academies themselves. They are willing to pay virtually whatever it takes to stock up. During my time on the ocean, I've even fought pirates whose entire cargo holds were full of the stuff. When

sold to the right buyer, redstone can prove to be even more valuable than gold and jewels."

Sam was aware that he was rambling, but he didn't stop because he knew he was listened to. He was listened to very intently, and by the whole room no less. Even after his main explanation was finished and he caught his breath, they were all waiting for more.

"I know quite a few potential clients who would be more than willing to take the lot. I'll happily write to them in the kingdom's name. Regular shipments could also provide an even more regular flow of wealth that'll at least stabilize the economy long enough to help it heal from any recent financial hits without compromising the welfare of the people."

Silence.

Sam added, as final remark; "The mining ventures will also create a few more jobs, just in case you need any."

Again, no one said a word.

Then, one of the advisors quietly picked up her pen, spent a minute or two scribbling, and looked up at Sam, the queen and the rest of the cabinet.

"It could work."

Queen Sylvee grinned. "I told you all that an outside view would be valuable."

All at once, the air in the meeting room changed. Worried glances and pessimistic outlooks thawed into warm, relieved smiles and a muffled buzz of ecstatic activity.

Sam was on a buttered roll and a sweet, sweet high. "I studied at the Hermitcraft Academy and became a redstone Grand Master. I could help teach some of your people the basics to become redstone engineers. That would open up new doors for trade and international connections opportunities."

He was aware that probably no one was really listening to him anymore. He had flipped a switch that had ended up unblocking what appeared to be a couple of years' worth of paused plans, abandoned ideas and stagnant thoughts. Everything suddenly seemed to be working more swiftly than it ever had before.

The only three members that still took note of Sam were Corpse, Sylvee and the nameless amphibian.

The feline nodded to him, visibly impressed, and Sam thought he even saw the hint of a smile twitch the corner of his muzzle.

His sister did the same, not necessarily impressed but rather knowing. The fact that Sam's passing remark had almost single handedly saved the whole realm's economy and secured a new future for it didn't seem to come as a surprise to her.

She did look exhausted, though; unwell, even. It was flickering in her eyes alongside the fierce sisterly pride she was upholding. Sam swore that she was even a little paler than the day before.

And finally, the frog hybrid flashed him a full smile and a thumbs up. After the meeting, he shook Sam's hand and introduced himself as Boomer.

"What you did back there was pretty impressive!"

Sam awkwardly wiped his newly slime-coated palm clean and chuckled, a touch embarrassed by the praise. "Even if I didn't, someone else would have," he tried to argue.

"We both know that's not true," Boomer croaked, casting sidelong glances to the advisors filing out after them.

"They would have found a solution regardless, I think. My sister's a good ruler with some good ideas. You're lucky to have her."

"We are, just like how your nation must have been lucky to have you."

"I wouldn't know. They probably all hate me for leaving."

"Losing a leader is definitely a blow," Boomer agreed, and fell quiet. His shoulders sagged and he looked elsewhere, as if he wasn't telling Sam everything.

He wanted to pry the reason out of him desperately. Something was afoot, always present, constantly and lightly chewing at everyone inside the palace walls. He wanted to ask about it, but there was no use, and no need. He could feel it too. He could only guess.

A couple of healers pushed past Sam and Boomer and entered the meeting room, joining the queen still inside. The doors were closed.

The last one out was Corpse, who upon noticing Sam and Boomer were still around, turned to them briefly. "Perhaps Her Majesty was right about you, Your Highness." He bowed to him, then walked off.

Sam felt a chill run up his spine.

Your Highness.

He barely registered that Boomer was talking to him.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I asked if you'll be joining us again at some point."

"I don't know. It all depends on my sister."

He turned his attention back to the closed door behind them, wishing that he was still stupidly bold enough to simply barge in there and demand that all his questions be answered.

"Well I for one hope you will," Boomer grinned. "We need someone like you around here." He bowed quickly before taking his leave. "Your Highness."

The second time Sam was called the title, he barely heard it. He didn't want to hear it. It troubled him, even when he took his leave.

He went back to the empty drawing room from the day before and played a single, drawn out note on the piano. It echoed, alone, and was followed by no others.

Sam instead sat down at a desk, grabbed a quill, soaked the nib in ink and took out a piece of paper.

"What are you doing?"

A bouncy bundle of excitement trotted her way to his side and lay her snout on the edge of the workspace.

Sam smiled. "Good morning to you too, sweetheart. Did you sleep well?"

Michelle gave him a small hum in response, and immediately went back to the paper. "What is it?"

"A letter."

"To Ranboo?"

"To Ranboo."

"Can you tell him to tell Michael that we spent the night in a palace? He'll be so jealous!"

Sam laughed and leaned back in his chair. "What's this bragging war the two of you have embarked on all about? You've been at it for ages!"

Michelle gave him nothing but a shrug, feigning ignorance. She stared up at him with a puppy-eyed gaze. "Please?"

He sighed. "Alright. I'll paint a picture so grand that it'll haunt him for ages."

"Yes!"

Michelle pulled her hand down to her chest in triumph and hugged her father. Again, he sighed, just as fondly as he always did, and gave her a gentle forehead kiss. He looked around them and frowned.

"Where's your mother?"

"Somewhere," Michelle replied, leaning against him and looking down. "I don't know."

Neither did Sam. He had seen Puffy once that morning in passing. They exchanged nothing but a distant greeting before she trotted off to... somewhere, just as Michelle had said. That, along with their strained conversation at the piano, the quick peck on her cheek she allowed him the night before and her not daring to knock on his door troubled him. He hadn't gotten a chance to talk to her properly since they had set foot in the kingdom. It was almost as if she was purposely trying to avoid him. His stomach twisted at the very thought.

"Ma said she still loved you," Michelle offered.

As if that comment brought any kind of comfort. That meant there was a rift forming, even if others didn't notice it the way Sam did.

"And I love her too, I love her very, very much."

"She also said everything was confusing."

"It is. It's confusing, it's new, and it's even a little scary for all of us. I mean, these strangers decided to threaten my little girl."

Sam swept a hand under her chin and gently made her look at him. He smiled softly and pressed his forehead against hers.

Michelle puffed up her chest, "I wasn't scared."

"But / was."

She tilted her head to the side. "Don't be scared, Pa. Those guards can't hurt me; I'm too strong and fast for them."

"I'm sure you are, but that doesn't mean I'm not worried for you. " He pulled her into his arms. "I love you so much, Michelle. You're my precious jewel and my darling princess, and I can't bear the thought of anything happening to you."

Even when she was out of his sight for too long, he felt the pain of separation. A pain so deep within him that he felt sick every time it came along. No amount of preparation could have ever readied him for that. Every time, he was reminded just how new he was to fatherhood. A handful of years meant nothing; some things he would never get used to, for better or for worse.

His daughter's smile was one of the better ones, and the bright spark in her eye, and every time she said or she showed that she loved him.

Every time he was reminded just how lucky he truly was.

"Can I go explore?" Michelle begged, hopping up and down. "I want to see the gardens!"

"Well—"

Again, she gave him a sweet, pleading look and again, Sam folded all too easily.

"On one condition: don't get under Captain Corpse's feet."

"Why?"

"We don't know him too well, and I for one don't trust him too much. There's no telling what he'll do."

"But—"

"I trust you to behave yourself, and I'm only asking you to swear on this one thing. Promise me, princess. Stay out of his way."

She looked away. It was neither a confirmation nor a denial. Despite his better judgment, Sam didn't push too hard.

"You're a good girl, I'm just asking you to be sensible. Don't forget that we're guests here, alright?"

"Okay..."

"And if you see Puffy, please tell her that I love her," he added, his throat tightening, "and that if she wants to talk, I'll always be ready to listen."

"I will."

That was a promise sworn to be kept.

"Thank you."

Sam gave her one last embrace to the top of her head. It was reciprocated soon afterwards by a clumsy but endearing peck on his cheek before Michelle trotted off towards new adventures.

He watched her go, then turned back to his letter. He still didn't know what to say, and wondered if he was somehow procrastinating a little.

What could he say, and how could he say it? Even he didn't really know what exactly was happening, or what it would lead to. Normally he would let his thoughts run about, but right now they were just as muddled as the rest of his situation was.

He and undoubtedly the hive mind of the court were still swaying between the conflicting titles of "dirty pirate" and "Your Highness". Each equally as bitter on his tongue, each as out of place as the other.

But above all, he hadn't expected either of them.

Maybe he could start there.

He finally put pen to paper.

Dear Ranboo,

There's been an unexpected development in our ocean adventures...

She hadn't *exactly* promised her father she'd stay away from Corpse. She'd *agreed* that she would, but she didn't *promise* as such.

She knew he wanted her to, but he wouldn't know, right? And even if he did catch her, a quick excuse about randomly turning the wrong corner would hold up perfectly.

Michelle wasn't scared of anything, at least of anything irrational. Maybe she was wary of the dark whirlpools in the ocean, and perhaps she still wondered if there was a monster living under her bed or at least using it as a holiday home, but she wasn't scared of a grumpy kitty.

If anything, she was in awe of him. Everything about him, from the cold and commanding facade to his choice of armour and his sword, was impressive.

He and his men had been some of the only ones to see her for the fighter she was. When one of them had held their rapier just inches from her snout, she had been slightly scared, yes, but had also felt a twinge of pride.

They saw her as a threat. They saw her as being capable of posing a difficult fight.

They didn't mock her for her youth and inexperience, nor did they senselessly dote on her and shower her with every compliment under the sun.

That rapier held to her throat was a form of respect, even if it was a sorely shown one.

Corpse and the soldiers under his thumb were enigmas, unique challenges. She wasn't quite ready to let go of the thrill yet.

Even if that meant that she *technically* disobeyed her father in the process.

She tried to assure herself that she wasn't purposely looking for Corpse, that she was choosing random directions and not ones that led her closer to the sound of his voice, and that when she finally found him it was by pure coincidence and pure coincidence alone.

He was sitting on the edge of a pool at the center of one of the courtyards, sliding his blade against the moist surface of a handheld sharpening stone. The smooth hiss of metal on rock, just as sleek as his fur, was all that filled the air. There was no one else there; no courtiers, no palace staff, no other guards.

Just Corpse, his sword, and the young piglin watching him closely from the shadows.

He raised his head. Michelle quickly ducked behind a nearby pillar and held her breath. She didn't dare look around. The sounds of sharpening had stopped completely. There was complete silence, until Captain Corpse spoke.

"I saw you."

She held her breath. She said nothing. Her heartbeat quickened. She felt it climb up her throat, threatening to leap out entirely and run away, leaving her for dead.

"I'd come out if I was you."

Almost automatically, Michelle was going to obey. Something about his icy order and the menace in his tone forced her too.

It did until another voice answered in her place.

"What? There's *no way* you could have seen me there! That was such a good spot!"

A new pair of footsteps came to join them. Michelle peeked out from behind her hiding spot.

A guard sporting a navy blue uniform and sparse pieces of silver armour trudged out from behind another pillar on the opposite side of the courtyard. He was a fox with bright orange fur that escaped in cloudy puffs from every gap in his attire, so thick and puffy that it doubled his body-frame's width twice over. He had a bright, rounded face, the dimples of a smile still dimly present behind the raincloud currently pouring down on his head from his failure.

Corpse stood up and joined him. "It doesn't matter how good that hiding place may be, I didn't have to see you to know exactly where you were; I smelt you."

The fox frowned even more. "Really? But I thought the scent of the posies would hide it!"

"That would only work if you yourself were smeared in perfume, if you made an *effort* to try and blend in. Your smell is your smell: if you don't try to disguise it for what it is, it will always stick out like a decaying corpse in the middle of a candy shop. To those with keener noses, at least."

"Duly noted, sir. I'm sorry."

"Don't say sorry to me, apologize to yourself. In battle that kind of careless behaviour would likely cost you your own life before it costs mine. Understood, lieutenant?"

"Understood, sir."

"Good. Now, let's go again. And remember, the flag is your target."

Corpse waved a red banner in front of the lieutenant's face—its presence initially overlooked by Michelle—before planting it back between the stacked rock centerpiece of the pool behind him. Then, as the fox slunk off back into the shadows, the captain went back to his place and started sharpening his sword again.

The cycle repeated itself.

But this time, Michelle decided to join in.

She quickly judged the distance, the obstacles and the hiding places between her and the flag. It was a bad idea to rush in head on with no plan.

"Even a second or two of analysis can be valuable," Uncle Techno had once whispered to her as she prepared to pounce on an unsuspecting Philza.

"Even having a brief idea of where you're going is better than nothing. A good warrior always takes a little time to choose their path, and above all they trust what their instincts tell them to."

Right now, Michelle's instincts were telling her that a different approach was needed.

Unlike the fox who went right back to his previous spot and seemed to take the same leap of faith, she worked her way around, ducking from pillar to pillar until she was behind Corpse. His eyes were still trained on his blade, but his ears routinely cocked in all directions and his whiskers twitched. He was awake and aware.

However, he was looking out for someone else: his marigold-furred, vulpine lieutenant that smelled of everything but posies.

Not a small, inconspicuous little piglin visitor from across the seas.

"Mystify, mislead, and surprise the enemy"—a direct quote from Sun Tzu, "The Art Of War".

That was probably what made her task easier. She was the surprise Corpse wasn't expecting.

Technoblade was right. She was as good a little fighter as he once said she was. She had been educated in the subject remarkably well.

She had never felt as proud as when she finally wrapped her hand around the flag's pole and hoisted it up from between the pile of rocks. She tripped backwards with the effort. A little pebble rolled and fell into the pool below with a little *plop!*

Still, Corpse didn't look her way. He was far more engrossed in the badly hidden ball of fuzz trying to sneak out from behind a low wall.

"Seepeekay, I can see you."

"No you can't."

"I can see your tail," the captain sighed. "Come on."

The fox groaned and shuffled out from the shadows. "That's not fair, *she* wasn't even trying to be sneaky!"

"She?"

Seepeekay pointed past Corpse, who turned around.

Michelle clutched the flag closer, the tips of her ears turning red.

"I used to play the same game with my uncle," she said in a vague attempt to explain herself.

She crossed eyes with the fox who, despite having lost to a kid and had just ratted her out, beamed brightly. Corpse on the other hand barely flinched from his regular, cold attitude. He took the flag from her.

"Wouldn't expect anything different from a pirate's kid," he muttered under his breath. "But that was a good attempt. See, Seepeekay? If a little girl can do it, so can you."

The "little girl" frowned. "I can fight too."

She could show him. She could beat him, or at least put up enough of a fight to earn the captain's admiration.

As it were, he sniffed doubtfully and looked away. His paw didn't even hover over the pommel of his sword. She took that as an insult.

"Lieutenant, clean up this mess." He gestured to the number of loose stones Michelle had sent tumbling to the bottom of the pool.

"Yes, sir."

He saluted as Captain Corpse took his leave, flag still in hand, then crouched down at the edge of the pool and started picking out the pebbles.

Not really thinking too much, Michelle went to do the same. She only realized her mistake when the water burned the tips of her fingers.

"No, let me."

Seepeekay gently moved her aside and continued his task at hand. She sat still and silent, drumming her scorched fingers on her knee and watching him.

"Your uncle sounds like a pretty cool guy," he eventually said. "Do you think he can give me a few lessons?"

Michelle laughed a little. She couldn't help herself. "I haven't seen him for ages," she admitted, a little sadly.

"Well in that case, maybe *you* can be the one to teach me. No one's ever managed to sneak past Corpse before."

She brightened up. "Really?"

"Really. That was very impressive. How old are you?"

"I'll be eleven in two months," she announced proudly.

Seepeekay's eyes widened, then his ears fell. "And I'm thirty and I'm still not living up to Corpse's high expectations," he sighed. "What a world..."

Michelle didn't like making someone sad, least of all someone who seemed as jolly and huggable as this fox was.

"I bet you're better with a sword than me."

He perked up. "You think so?"

"I haven't fought in any actual battles yet. My pa's kind of overprotective and goes easy on me when we spar." She fiddled with her trotters. "It's not as fun as when I did it with my uncle..."

"My mother was like that too. I had to *literally* fight my way out from under her thumb to ever have a chance of getting into the guard. Then, I feel like I have to fight every day just to stay in it. Overprotective parents can be a nightmare sometimes... no offense to your father, of course! Word's going around that he's just solved the kingdom's economic depression."

"What's that?"

"It's complicated to explain, even for me. I'm a soldier, not a politician. I work with more weapons than words."

Michelle liked the sound of that. "Could you teach me?" she asked him.

"Teach you?"

"About other weapons, and how to fight with them."

It sounded like an easy enough suggestion. Michelle wanted to learn to fight properly; Seepeekay wanted to prove himself to someone. It was flawless, in theory.

But the fox was noticeably hesitant. "I've never had an apprentice before," he admitted, folding his ears back. "They gave me a rank, but I don't think they think I'm good enough to teach."

"That's alright, I've never had a proper mentor before either."

Unfortunately, Techno didn't count. He was more family than anything. She needed a real teacher, a real challenge.

This random lieutenant was the perfect fit. They could both learn from each other. He seemed to be warming up to the idea as well.

"How long are you staying?"

Michelle shrugged.

Seepeekay took a moment to ponder some more. Then, he smiled. "I have heard rumours of excellent warriors being trained in very little time."

"Is that a yes?"

"Depends," he replied. His bushy tail was wagging uncontrollably. "Do you have your own blade?"

She thought he'd never ask.

Chapter Ten: Mending

Puffy only managed to sleep about ten minutes once she got back to her room.

Ten *minutes*.

Ten minutes of peace before a whirlwind woke her up.

Michelle placed a kiss on her cheek before proclaiming—rather loudly in her ear—that she was going to go explore. Then, a sharp, clawed knock against the door told her that her feline bodyguard was here to escort her down to breakfast.

She never made it there, as a stumble across Sam's path brought back the events of the night before, and her guilt with them. She couldn't face him then, and she couldn't face him now.

Around the same time that Sam's eyes burned through her back, Corpse's own amber gaze disappeared. He left her at a random turning in a hallway and with a brief warning that read more as a hostile threat, he walked into a nearby room. He shut the door.

He was gone, for now, but somehow that only made everything worse. His very presence had latched itself onto her conscience.

Sam was nowhere to be seen. Their daughter was gods know where, doing gods know what. She could be in danger. They both could be. They were on foreign lands, in a strange place with strange people.

Puffy couldn't breathe.

Every corridor, every room, every inner courtyard, no matter how bright and airy they were, suffocated her. Velvet curtains and cushions and uniforms and dresses, the clouds of perfume and sweet scented flower bouquets, the severe gazes of the paintings hung on every available wall space.

Everything warped. A fish-eyed veil descended in front of her eyes. Close things were now a million miles in front of her, and faraway obstacles were rushing towards her at full speed.

She ran.

She booked it down the labyrinth of senses no longer familiar to her. Once, they were bound to kings, kingdoms, evil empires and dubious masquerade balls that she had befriended, protected, infiltrated and attended. No more. All of that was part of another world she had thought she left behind.

She felt look after look from the living and the painted alike burn through her like smouldering arrows. When she did try to catch them, every gaze turned into a fiery amber, and concerned fingers stretched towards her turned into sharp claws ready to tear her apart.

She didn't stop.

She had to escape them.

She needed... the sky.

Wind.

Water. Any kind of water.

She came out into the gardens.

The sky was blue. A gentle breeze caressed through her curls, a loving hand that soothed and attempted to untangle her senses. The lake was sparkling. The boisterous banter of the court turned to whispered conversations uttered through the alleys. There was no violence, no clashing glitter or harsh decadence here.

Peace reigned supreme. It was a different world entirely.

And Puffy could *breathe*.

In, and out.

She was in the *proper* gardens, nothing like the small squares of sunlight locked between a labyrinth of endless hallways and pillars and walls of hard stone. They were large, open and sprawled across an entire length of the palace and almost to the ridge of the mountains. Alleys of limestone gravel criss-crossed through finely trimmed hedges and patches of greenery, styled in a geometric French fashion. Many were terraced with boxwood bushes and

ordered flower beds. Their sculpted topiary shapes undulated like the ocean waves, frozen in mid-movement. Birds chirped incessantly from the trees and the crooks of the marble statues.

The gardens continued all the way to the edge of a wide lake. The wilderness beyond reflected perfectly on its mirrored surface. The sun's rays made the last traces of mist dance and tiptoe away into the dark pine tree banks. Narrow beaten trails between the trunks beckoned her to follow them.

Take another step and she probably would have fallen over. Her hooves tingled. Her legs shook. She stumbled over to a nearby bench and collapsed onto it.

The tightness in her chest unravelled. The rushing blood in her ears subsided. The bright colours and suffocating scents softened until she was somewhat grounded.

Her head was pounding, even as she was regaining her senses. A wave of weakness rushed through her.

"Here, this might help."

She opened her eyes. The scent of a peeled mandarin met her nostrils. Her dry mouth began to water.

Tina held it out further. "Sugar is good," she smiled, carefully placing the fruit in Puffy's palm.

She said nothing, but sheepishly thanked her with a small smile. Peeling away one of the slices, she popped it in her mouth. The citric tang immediately stung her tongue, and in a matter of moments she was fully awake and aware.

Tina was right; sugar was good. Great, in fact. She had never tasted anything so delicious.

"You alright?"

Puffy nodded, then flushed in embarrassment. "I'm definitely giving everyone a bad first impression," she remarked with a bitter laugh.

"No, you're not. The true crime here is the amount of perfume some nobles put on. They could gas a whole army."

That made Puffy laugh a little, far more genuinely than her previous one had been. She ate another slice. It tasted even more heavenly than the first.

The lingering tang tickled her palate, and with it popped away the last deafening traces of the storm inside.

Tina sat down next to her. "I had a panic attack on my first day too."

"Really?"

"Yeah, much for the same reason you did. My first steps in the palace were... overwhelming, to say the least. It was all so new to me, and I panicked. I rushed out and sat down on the exact same bench as you, and I ate from that very tree." She nodded towards a potted tree. Its branches were laden with ripe orange mandarins, as round as baubles on a Yule tree. "I still do, when I feel down. They're my comfort food."

They were about to become Puffy's too. She finished the remaining slices, licking the sticky juices off the tips of her fingers.

"Feel better?"

"Much." Puffy smiled. "Thank you."

There was no reason for Tina to be so nice to her. Puffy had been nothing but an infamous problem and the eyesore of the guard captain. Everyone else would have probably left her alone or branded her mad.

Not Tina.

"Of course. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for an old arms companion. We SMP folk have been through way too much to suddenly break our bonds."

Loyalty.

Puffy had no idea why that realization took her as aback as it did.

Both of them had never spoken face to face. Borders and oceans and realms and years would have split them up even if they had. They would have become strangers either way.

So *why?*

She almost couldn't understand it, until she admitted to herself that she would have done the very same thing.

Camaraderie knew no limits, no matter how far apart they were, or how foreign they were to each other. One battle and one common enemy had apparently been enough to solidify that.

Puffy would fight to defend it until the end.

"And I'd like to consider you a friend," Tina continued, "if you'd let me, of course."

There was no way she would ever refuse, and her consent elicited the brightest of smiles and the most excited of clapping hands.

"You have no idea how long I've waited to be able to talk to someone from my old home," she sighed. "Everyone else is nice, but no one could ever completely understand it all, you know?"

She didn't exactly know what that meant until Tina began to talk. Ramble would be more accurate, in fact. She started going on and on about times long gone, about places and people Puffy knew and treasured greatly in her memory. She mentioned unforgettable events whose scars still tarnished the sheep years later, and smaller passing ones she had all but forgotten about over time. Some she was there for, others she wasn't. All of them painted a picture of a landscape and rewrote a history she had left behind not as long ago as she had once thought.

It was an almost one-sided conversation, at first, but who could blame her? Tina was excited; Puffy was content with listening. When she did occasionally pipe up, she was met with a grin and an even more upbeat reply. The energy lifted until even Puffy herself was affected.

Talking with Tina was easy. She reminded Puffy a little of Niki.

The morning dragged on everywhere but between them. There, it seemed to pass by at lightning speed.

When she reminisced with Sam, Time always slowed in its tracks. Every memory was laid down gently, draped with emotion and detail that would amuse or sadden them both—usually the latter. It was all shared and recounted together, side by side, with honesty and comfort.

Reminiscing with Tina felt more like an abstract patchwork quilt crocheted for a deadline: both of them added on to each other's story with fleeting details and loose threads, perhaps with some tales more embellished with others.

It was a mess, and it was liberating.

Their shared history wasn't the only thing Tina could ramble on for ages and ages.

When Puffy finally found her footing again, they took to the gravel alleys. Tina kept her promise from the night before and showed her every single inch of the blooming grounds, from the smallest forget-me-not to the largest sequoia tree planted just at the edge of the forest. She could name every colour, every smell, even identify every rustle of a leaf and snap of a twig. She knew petals, wood, even weeds like the back of her hand. Her knowledge of plants was more than impressive; it was absolutely astounding, borderline inhuman.

Puffy was certain she couldn't even name half the flowers Tina could, nevermind their meanings or medicinal properties, or even the specific kind of care each one needed.

There was certainly something about the gardens that fully awoke something in Tina. It was almost as if it was her blood and flesh itself.

Puffy only knew of one place more vibrant and diverse, where the fungi and magical plants grew abound with no semblance of discipline. That place was Kinoko Kingdom, and it was undeniable to admit that its citizens had been the happiest of all the SMP's nations. They were constantly giddy with endorphins, sweet smells and fungi essence. They were the last ones who would have had the will and drive to travel far past the SMP's borders.

Which begged the question.

"Why did you leave Kinoko?"

Tina shrugged. Her hands delicately cupped a white tulip, inviting Puffy to smell it.

"I wanted to see new skies, go on a few adventures. I'll be honest, things became a little boring once Dream was gone. Sounds awful, I know, but that was what fifteen year-old me thought at the time. Peace and quiet was nice, but it wasn't for me back then. I needed *more*. I wandered around for quite a while, dipping from village to village and town to town. I lost everything I owned, twice, then I made it all up again with a few part-time jobs. I worked on a farm, opened up a flower shop and even became a healer for a bit. It was when I arrived here that I realized that I should put a halt on my travelling life. It was nice while it lasted, but it wasn't me in the long run. I became a gardener, got hired by the palace, and here I am."

She ended her story with a little bow, applauded by the lively foliage around them who swayed and danced with the breeze. It seemingly didn't matter where Tina was; her home was always wherever the flowers grew best.

It was only then that Puffy realized how young Tina was. She was younger than most. She was even younger than Puffy's own son was now.

"What about you, captain? Why did you leave the SMP?"

Puffy swallowed hard.

Tina was easy to talk to, but not that easy. No one was.

"Just the thirst for adventure," she lied. "I missed the ocean."

"The ocean, huh? Wow, you're braver than I thought! I can't stand the waves, they make me sick. No thank you, m'am, my feet are rooted securely onto land and I'd like them to stay that way."

Tina shivered and made a retching noise. Puffy laughed.

"I guess it's not for everyone."

"Captain Puffy!"

At the unfamiliar call of her name, her smile faltered.

An angel, clad in robes of gold and white linen, waved her over from afar. Captain Puffy froze to the spot, too afraid to answer, almost too afraid to even look.

"I've been looking for you." Queen Sylvee held out her hand. "Walk with me."

Her invite was nothing but soft and genuine. Puffy exchanged a glance with Tina.

Her friend tipped her straw hat. "Duty calls me too," she apologized. "Have fun!"

She hoped she would.

Puffy and Sylvee hadn't interacted much since their original audience, and the captain couldn't help but suck in a nervous breath. She followed the queen down one of the smaller alleys, not daring to speak until spoken to.

Instead, she watched her.

Her walk was careful and featherlight, and every step was silent. It was a big contrast to Puffy's own hoofsteps, decidedly bouncier even when she tried to match the monarch's pace.

Puffy was like a flighty doe ready to spring off into the mountains.

Sylvee was a swan. There was a graceful sense of freedom in her, something that was quite unlike Sam's heavy steps, strong figure and grounded attitude. They did however both share a striking nobility.

In her, Puffy saw her partner.

That eased her.

A little.

"I hope the room was comfortable enough."

Sylvee gazed at her with bright, beautiful eyes. They were a pale blue, so pale they were almost ghostlike.

"They were," Puffy assured, not that she was the one to ask. She had barely slept in one all night.

"And I hope that Corpse wasn't too much of a bother."

That was a little more delicate, but Puffy couldn't just go and say it right out, especially to his royal employer.

"He's just doing his duty," she replied.

It was starting to sound more like an excuse now.

The queen smiled. "He can be a lot, I know."

In that case, Puffy wanted to know why she wasn't calling him off. "Your Majesty—"

"Please, call me Sylvee. You're like family now."

Puffy blinked. "I am?"

It had been less than a day and a night. If trust was indeed such a simple and easy thing to give out around here, she could indeed find Corpse's hostility and suspicion somewhat justified.

"I don't think I could be considered family."

"Of course you can."

"You barely know me."

"I don't need to; I admire you, Puffy. You're the lucky one who finally stole my brother's heart. That says a lot."

"Well, it's the one and only time I've done so, Your Maj—Sylvee. I don't steal. I'm not a pirate. It's a long story, as I said."

"I know, I was filled in."

"Oh?"

The queen smiled and gestured to a lone bench set along the side of one of the gravel paths.

Puffy stopped in her tracks.

"Oh."

There, surrounded by trimmed laurel hedges and waist-high clumps of hemlock, was Sam. He was staring out at the mountain range across the lake.

"We talked long and hard, and he's worried for you."

Puffy's heart tightened. "I know he is."

"He loves you."

"And I do too."

"So why don't you go talk to him?"

"I..." Her hoof tapped nervously against the ground. "I don't know. There's just no point."

"No point?"

"It's nothing, really. There's no need to worry him any further. I'll get my bearings, eventually. It'll pass, and everything will be fine."

"Puffy—"

"It's fine."

She couldn't even cross the queen's gaze. At one point, they stopped.

A gentle but insistant cough made Puffy turn her head. Sylvee gave her a long look. "He just wants to make sure you're alright. Just talk to him, Captain."

"But—"

"That's a royal order."

There was no malice in Sylvee's words, but a gentle, good-natured urge that reminded Puffy so much of Sam's own. So much so that she obeyed without much of a fight.

Sam's faraway gaze was reeled back as soon as her hooves crunched the gravel next to him.

He smiled so sweetly, as if nothing at all was amiss. "Hey," he greeted her.

She quickly gave him a small wave back. "Hey."

"How did you sleep?"

"I didn't."

"Yeah, neither did I." He turned to the lake again with a loud sigh. "I guess we're not used to comfortable beds anymore. I find that if my sheets aren't stiff with salt they simply aren't adequate enough for our ocean instincts."

That made Puffy snicker, and that was seemingly his intent. He looked back with a deep fondness in his eyes. That only made the swirling storm inside her worse.

"Yeah, it feels... weird."

With that confession came a silence, and she didn't know what to do with herself. She fidgeted, shifting from foot to foot and keeping her gaze turned away. She looked out across the water. A pair of swan were gliding elegantly over the lake's surface. She wished she could join them.

"Puffy?"

"Huh?"

"You can sit down, you know."

"Oh, right."

She took a seat beside him. It did nothing to calm her nerves. She looked down at her legs. The tingling started again.

"It felt empty without you," she finally admitted.

"Is that why you were outside my door?"

She looked up. "You knew?"

He sighed and gazed out across the lake. He too watched the swans with a little smile. "I was thinking about doing the same thing myself—knocking, walking in and holding you and Michelle close until the sun came up."

Puffy had wanted nothing more.

"Why didn't you, then?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

She fell silent. Her legs swung and kicked faster until Sam's hand landed on her knee. Everything stopped except for her heart, beating far faster than it should have.

"Puffy, I just need to know. I felt like I've done something wrong and I don't know what. I just want to understand."

It didn't take much for her to blurt out the truth. His touch, although minimal, unlocked everything.

"I just knew that if I went in, I'd end up spilling all my thoughts to you and that was something I didn't want to do."

"That doesn't mean you can't at least tell me what's wrong. Even if it's something you don't think we can fix, you don't have to wallow away in the dark alone. Who knows, maybe we'll even find a solution, but please don't feel like you're doing us a favour by locking it all up. I hate seeing you so miserable. Talk to me, and I'll listen. I always will."

She shook her head. "I don't want to be the one who ruins everything."

"You never are."

"Reuniting with your sister after all these years is an incredible feat, and I don't want to tear you away from her so quickly."

He seemed to realize. "Are you not happy here?"

"I don't know, not yet. It's complicated. I'm just... scared."

There it was. The weight in her chest ebbed away, at last.

It was hard to go on. Her hands interlaced with his.

"Puffy, my dearest, my darling, my love—" He held her hand even tighter. "—please."

She sighed. "Things yesterday were hectic, and having a constant guard surveying my back scares me. I feel like I'll get stabbed for so much as breathing in the wrong direction."

It looked like Sam was about to agree with her and tell her he understood, but quickly backed out. She was glad he did. Sam, as soon as everyone found out who he was, was revered with the same respect and admiration as a long lost hero returning from an odyssey. Meanwhile, the sea captain who accompanied him was regarded as a troublemaker, a criminal who was probably responsible for the kidnapping and brainwashing of Queen Sylvee's long lost brother. He didn't understand what it was like to have someone like Corpse threaten your life if you set a single hair out of line.

So he didn't claim to. As he promised he'd do, he listened intently without a word.

Nevertheless, she wanted an answer, any answer from him.

Puffy's throat tightened. "Sam, I'm not a pirate, am I?"

"You are most definitely not. You are a legendary sea captain, and a hero in so many ways that no one in this entire realm would ever come close to understanding or being. They don't know everything. You are anything but a pirate and above all you are my partner in everything. You're the fearless beauty who gave me her heart and I will make them love you as much as I do."

"It can't be that easy."

"You are absolutely wonderful. We'll make them see that. Trust me, darling."

She did, more than anything and anyone. She nodded.

"We'll do this together, alright? We're lightning and thunder, remember?"

His words made her smile, and with that smile came glassy eyes. Tears were ready to fall, although she wasn't sure exactly what for.

"Hey, hey... It's alright." Sam stretched out his arms for an embrace. "Come here."

Puffy's desperation for warmth from the night before washed over her again.

A hug would be nice.

He brought her wordlessly into his arms and squeezed her tightly. She never wanted him to let go again and buried her face into his shoulder. They stayed like that for a while until a butterfly landing on Sam's finger made him pull away and softly point it out to her.

She had never seen a more beautiful one. A monarch with vibrant orange and black wings speckled with pearly spots of white, softly fluttering from Sam's hand to hers.

"It likes you," he pointed out, resting his chin on her shoulder and giving her a wink. "I'd count that as a win."

Of course, there was a stark difference between a butterfly and the entirety of a royal court. One was big and judgemental. The other was small, delicate and ephemeral. The butterfly had nothing to lose, but the court had everything. However, in that moment Puffy didn't care. Sam was right: it was a start. There was hope.

She caught sight of Tina out of the corner of her eye, attending to some of the vines that crept up the side of a palace wall.

A sympathetic-looking vulpine guard was sparring with Michelle in a small patch of grass, gently correcting her stumbles and blunders with quick words and smiles.

Queen Sylvee was still watching them from afar, as fair and upright as the marble effigies scattered around. She smiled, and Puffy smiled back.

Even Corpse was there in passing, marching at the head of a patrol. He seemed less intimidating once he was outnumbered, despite still drifting like a dangerous shadow of despair among the living.

When they crossed gazes from afar, Puffy puffed up her chest and made a show of lovingly threading her fingers through her beloved's hair. She also kissed his neck, making Sam start in surprise. Perhaps it was a petty display, but gods it made Puffy feel like she was a queen.

Captain Corpse did nothing but scowl. He moved along with a flick of his broken tail.

She relished in her small but significant victory by making her mind up.

"I want to attend the ball."

"Really?"

"Really. Maybe the first impressions were a little off, but that can definitely change. I'm ready to give this whole place another chance."

He pressed his forehead against hers, and she closed her eyes. It was a warmth she had missed dearly in their few hours of tension. "Thank you, this means more to me than you can imagine."

"You'd do the same for me," she reminded him. "The same, and more besides."

Not for the first time, she found herself wondering what her own family would think of her now, and what they would think of Sam. Would they love him as much as she did, or would they scowl at the very sight of him?

She didn't know, and she was scared of the answer.

But now was not the time for such worrisome thoughts.

Sam was *here*, with her and no one else, and he was loving her just as he always did. Nothing could change that, or change him. He was happy in that moment, and so was she. Her spirits heightened with his, and so did her view of the world around them.

It was a beautiful one, after all.

The monarch butterfly flew off and disappeared down an alley, but not before lingering in mid air for a moment. It was almost as if it was inviting Puffy to join it. She *would* have to properly explore the wonderland of terraced gardens one day. She'd have the time to, anyhow.

Another chance.

It was more than deserved.

Chapter Eleven: History Has Its Eyes On You

"Ranboo—"

"Niki, please, not now—"

"This is important!"

"I know, I know." He felt incredibly guilty, even as he roughly shook her off and backed away. "I've got to go, or else the cabinet will have my head!"

"But—"

"We can talk later, alright?"

"What? No, Ranboo, for gods—"

He slammed the castle doors shut.

"Ranboo!"

He tuned her out, and his conscience hated him for it.

"Tough day so far, huh?" chuckled a nearby guard.

Ranboo sighed, readjusting his cravat. "You have no idea..."

He trudged off towards the Great Hall. His mood was only slightly improved when he knocked and walked in.

Eret smiled at him. "Good morning, Ranboo! How are you today?"

Fearing Niki's going to assassinate me. Wondering what Michael and Tubbo are going to make for dinner. Missing my bed.

"Up and ready to work!"

"That's what we like to hear!" The king eagerly invited him to sit down with the rest of his advisors. "Now, to start us off, I'm glad to announce that the Greater SMP is back to its former glory and fully operational. The storm left little to no lasting damage, and the Community House junction has been finally completely drained and dried. Our trade routes are fully open again!"

The king's cabinet clapped and cheered.

Ranboo stared at a small spider hanging down from the high vaulted ceiling and wondered what it would be like to be an arachnid with hundreds of eyes and eight little legs.

Who would ever need so many legs?

Ew.

As the other advisors continued to talk, he wondered if Niki was banging on the castle doors or sharpening a kitchen knife to slit his throat. It would probably be deserved if she did. Or maybe not.

Niki had two emergency modes that Ranboo knew of: "oh no the milk delivery didn't come in time and Velvet was called away on Badlands business, could you come over and help?" mode and "there's a homicidal maniac on the loose and we're all going to die, convene the Syndicate and prepare your last will and testament" mode.

The second mode hadn't been activated in years. There was no reason it would switch on now, right? Not when everything was going perfectly. There was nothing to worry about.

She was probably overreacting. Yeah, that was it. She had to be playing it up.

She had to, right?

After all—

"Ranboo!"

He snapped to attention. He wasn't in the Great Hall anymore. He was sitting in front of Eret's desk. He held a quill in one hand and a decent stack of papers in the other. More were strewn across from him, his own work mixed with the king's. Eret was staring at him from behind a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, his official attire gone in favour of more comfortable clothes.

"You here?"

"Yes, Your Majesty..."

He wasn't entirely sure if he was. He feigned trying to get back to work, staring blankly at lines of text he didn't remember writing down in the first place. Reading them over amounted to nothing.

Eret let out a hum Ranboo could only describe as doubtful, but didn't probe. He looked back at his own work.

"I was just wondering what wedding present I should give Sapnap and Karl."

"I don't know..."

Ranboo already had his, specifically for Sapnap—or so his memory book claimed. And the memory book never lied.

Still, that wasn't the point: when the heck did he manage to calculate four million emeralds? For what? What in the name of the gods was that all about?

"I was thinking something along the lines of a pair of matching swords," Eret continued, kicking his feet onto the tabletop. "Although, that might seem a little classic, not too original. What do you think?"

I think that this four million emerald expense just appeared out of nowhere.

"Sure, that works."

Eret's silences became more frequent. The hybrid could vaguely feel his pearly gaze burn through him. However, it would never burn a bigger than this four million emerald investment would in the kingdom's coffers.

"If not, maybe I could give them a potted plant."

"Mhm."

Eret sighed. "And maybe I'll set fire to their kingdom while I'm at it."

"Sounds good."

"Ranboo." The papers were pried from his grasp. "This is the second time today. You're not listening to me, are you?"

As the extortionate sum of money slipped away, so did his overwhelming confusion that rendered him almost completely deaf.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, hanging his head a little.

"It's alright, we all have bad days. Tell me about it."

Eret put down his own work and sat back. He even pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose. He was all eyes and ears - and not giving Ranboo much of a choice about it. The monarch had an eerie knack for silent, twinkling-eyed insistence. It made advisors, courtiers and fiends alike waver and cave in almost every time.

Ranboo liked to teasingly combat it here and there, and if this was other day he would have. Today, he didn't feel like it.

"Is it the enderwalk?"

"What? No, I haven't had that in ages."

At least, he thought he hadn't.

"Then what is it?"

Ranboo sat back and sighed.

"Niki wanted to talk to me and I shut a door in her face."

"Ah. I see"

"No, I mean *literally* shut the door in her face. The castle door. I think the guards had to turn her away, and I didn't do anything about it. I didn't even stop and listen to her once."

He slumped in his seat.

"It was something important. I know it was. Niki never asks for help like that unless it's serious, and I still turned her away for a meeting I don't even remember anything about. I screwed up everywhere today. Everytime I try to do something right, something else goes wrong and it's always my fault. Everything else can change, but that fact never will."

He knew Eret well enough to know that he wouldn't lie to him. "You should have at least listened to her," he agreed, leaning forwards. "Even if that made you a little late. I'd let it slide. She's your friend."

"You are too, though."

"But there's a link between you and Niki that I could never have. I can see it but I can't really describe it. Your bond is deeper than many realize. "

"Still, I couldn't. You're a monarch."

Eret laughed heartily. "Oh come on, Ranboo. You were Technoblade's student, don't make me believe for a second that he *ever* encouraged you to obey authority!"

Ranboo burst out laughing as well before he could stop himself, and before he remembered that he wouldn't be able to laugh about this moment with the aforementioned mentor anymore.

As he reeled himself back in, a small, sad smile lingered behind. "He must have skipped that particular lesson of my warrior training," he joked weakly. His ears and tail drooped. "I miss him."

The monarch offered him a sympathetic smile. "I do too."

"It's not just because he isn't here, nowadays. He's a hero and a legend, and yet no one seems to talk about him anymore, even before he was gone. It's almost like as soon as Dream died, his reputation did too. I don't understand why..."

Eret's smile remained. "Are you worried that he's going to sink into obscurity?"

"Yeah. He doesn't deserve to."

Eret stood, "Let me show you something."

The change in their quiet chat was startling. Ranboo spared a glance for the abandoned work on the desk.

"What about—"

"I was starting to lose interest in the paperwork side too," the king admitted, shrugging. "Why waste time on it when we can go and see the real thing?"

Ranboo understood right then where Eret was taking him.

There were four colossal wonders in the SMP. Four magnum opuses created by four powerful rulers, each with their own notable collection of good, bad and ugly things they stood for.

One of them was gone entirely: L'Manberg, the nation of the free and the rebellious. The catalyst of the SMP's violent history. Created by Wilbur Soot, it fell just as he did—tragically, and needlessly. Now all that remained was a large, rocky crater, visited and lit up with memorial candles only once a year.

Another was crumbling Las Nevadas, the materialistic underworld where the only thing that ran more abundantly than champagne was glitz, glamour and easy living. The amateur tycoon who built it deserted it. It was abandoned, and was now no more than a ghost town. The only reason people still went there was to pillage what was left and recover building materials. It still lived

on, fractured and rehomed, in other structures and other foundations. Its glory days were left behind and forgotten.

One was still standing, and it would for centuries and centuries to come. Located along the Northern coastline, separated from the Badlands by nothing but a narrow channel, Pandora's Vault was an obsidian monument of staggering proportions. The inside crawled with intricate redstone machinery, popping lava pockets and stale blood on the walls from many a tragic crime. The outside was cold, angular and imposing, a constant black shadow visible from almost every nation that sat around it. Once an impenetrable prison, it was now used as a fortified storage unit. It now secured jewels, grain and other necessary riches instead of violent prisoners. It had a happier ending than most of the other monumental marvels.

Still, Ranboo often found himself taking a long look from time to time, from vantage points on the Prime Path and the hillocks of the Greater SMP. He, like others, still could not forget its history. There was a time he had begged to be locked up in there, and the memory sent a shiver running up his spine. Those who went in rarely came out the same, no matter how good their hearts were.

He would never know how difficult it truly was for Sam, the Vault's creator and first Warden. Ranboo was simply a witness to the damage it did. Perhaps distancing himself from the prison was the only good thing about Sam leaving the realms. It snapped the cursed tether.

As far as the hybrid knew, Pandora's Vault wouldn't hurt anyone ever again.

The last wonder was the one that was still in construction; the large, pantheon-like structure sitting at the heart of the Greater SMP. It was still a little new on its foundations, with far more temporary wooden beams than marble columns to its name, but wondrous nevertheless.

Ranboo had visited the museum's construction site countless times, and yet he never ceased to be flabbergasted by the sheer immensity of it. Even now, standing in the middle of the wooden floor that rumbled with the heavy footsteps of the builders, he felt like an ant.

Although they were only half-finished, the walls still stretched up high around them, so high they caressed the sky with flat fingertips. The finished lines of stone bricks were being fitted with wrought iron supports, their welders twisting and fashioning them into the ornate curvatures that would then hold up the glass dome. Scaffolding was being put up and pulled down and pushed across to the other side of the room, avoiding the narrow gaps in the unfinished floor. In the rare, unoccupied corners, wooden crates, chests and securely wrapped objects were packed on top of one another in awkward

piles, all of them containing unknown treasures and items belonging to the future exhibits.

Eret certainly knew where they all would go better than Ranboo ever could. The monarch knew everything there was to know about the museum project. He was also a hundred or so steps ahead, even if his advisors spent seven days and nights straight religiously studying the plans and notes.

Everything about the project was impressive.

Ranboo would often wonder if King Eret wasn't trying to prove something—to his people, to the other nations, to himself. When Eret would talk about his museum, he had Wilbur's impassioned speeches and dreams, Quackity's taste for lavishness and extravagance, and Sam's drive for perfection and his calculated architectural talent. He seemed to have a part of all the giants that came before him, and yet none of himself. Each wonder bore the markings of its maker, but the museum itself was hard to make out. It was the strangest of the wonders, built by a king who was everyone and no one at the same time.

Of course, Ranboo kept all of that to himself.

In the end, he knew that books wouldn't be enough to chronicle the entire complexity of the SMP's history. There had to be something else, something bigger than a simple library shelf. Ranboo had to hand it to his king; the museum was a good idea.

"Come on, Ranboo!"

Eret had made good time in the last minute or so the hybrid had been standing still, and beckoned to him. Ranboo rushed to join his side and together they descended the grand staircase by the back wall that led down into the underground levels.

Immediately, the air changed. The breeze of the Greater SMP gave away to a heavier atmosphere, one that amplified all the different smells around them: the new velvet carpets, the drying plaster paint, the pine chips from vigorous sanding and the musty scent of some older artifacts that somehow managed to seep through the cracks in their encasings. The noise was noticeably duller too. There were much fewer workers down here, and even they seemed to be taking a small, quiet break. The mounted lanterns on the walls cast pools of mellow light, plunging everything in a pleasant and cosy atmosphere. It was all so peaceful, but perhaps a little haunting as well. Despite looking complete and breathed in with life, it was surprisingly empty. Pedestals and elevated platforms, even the walls, were bare. The items to be displayed were mostly stacked in the shadows, rendering them almost

invisible to a passing eye. The few souls that wandered around were more phantoms than living beings. They didn't look like they belonged there at all. It was big, and it was eerily empty.

Ranboo couldn't help but swallow hard.

Eret, however, had still not dropped his jovial demeanour. He breathed in the liminal space around them as if it was the greatest, most sacred place in the world.

"Prepare to be amazed," he hummed cheerfully, setting off down one of the carpeted alleys.

As usual, Ranboo could do nothing but follow.

The velvet cushioned their footsteps, tracing out a luxurious, noiseless path for them towards an unknown destination. Again, every display platform they passed was empty. Ranboo could only imagine what each of them were for.

Maybe that one would be for L'Manberg, or something to do with the Disk Confrontation. That one's got a pretty big wall space; he wondered if there will be a mural there at some point. That alcove is surprisingly small, you could barely fit a single item in there. Must be for something important.

But again, Eret had the exact vision and Ranboo didn't. He was probably wrong, and wrong, and wrong again. Only time would tell.

Then, Ranboo noticed that not everything was empty. An exhibition stage stretching almost the whole length of the back of the room was occupied by something.

Something.

Someone.

Ranboo sucked in a breath as they got closer. Two familiar, piglin eyes stared back at him. They were unmoving, unseeing, and made of hard stone.

For a moment, Ranboo panicked. "Did you—?"

"No, we left it in the tundra where it was. This is just an artistic recreation. Did I not tell you that Technoblade came to pose for one of our sculptors?"

No, he didn't.

"He didn't need much convincing. He was happy to do it, and even asked for one of the concept sketches afterwards. Now we know why."

"But why did you ask him in the first place?" Ranboo couldn't help but ask the monarch, pushing down the tears in his eyes. That damned statue, that damned reminder of yet another thing they lost, would never leave him alone. "What's it for?"

"What do you think? It's for this: the museum, his legacy!"

Eret stretched out his arms and gestured to the raised stage. He was showing him nothing, and yet it was so much more than that.

"This statue is only the beginning," he explained, approaching it and laying a gentle hand on the pommel of the carved sword. "We're going to fill this entire space with him. Anything we can do and find and display, we will. We'll tell as many stories as we can, and we'll do it well. His history is one worth telling, because a legend of his caliber doesn't deserve to and will not be forgotten. None of theirs will be."

It was then that Ranboo took note of more people coming in and more things being shuffled around. As he turned around, he finally realized how all the exhibits were finally being brought to life.

A moth-eaten captain's tricorne was being displayed here, a couple of music disks over there. A rusting silver trident was laid on a stand nailed into a wall, and an oil painting of a midnight-skinned demon in ruby robes was hung on the opposite side of the room. A pair of intricately crafted wing braces were being suspended from the roof.

Ranboo even saw a thick, curling pamphlet being laid on a plinth, the bold printed letters that had spelled out his downfall all those years ago.

Everyone he had known and loved—and still did—was here.

He looked around once again, then frowned. "Where's yours?"

Eret smiled, but didn't cross his gaze. "I don't belong among these great people," he replied, his tone forcefully made to be light. "I'll take my place where I deserve to be."

Ranboo noticed that there was nothing pertaining to Dream, nor Wilbur, nor Schlatt. He briefly wondered if they were going to be displayed on the level underneath, closer to the dark. The thought made his stomach churn.

"There's no good and bad though, right? Only misguided morals and means to an end. No one's good or evil, we're all just somewhere in the middle."

"Not for everyone, if you know what I mean," the monarch sighed. "History hasn't really been fair to everyone, has it? We can only do what we can to indulge and learn from it."

"So putting yourself with Dream—?"

"Is where some people would rather I be put. I could never hold a candle to Technoblade or Sam, or even you."

"You're a good king."

"But *you* helped take down the Egg. You were brave enough to tell everyone the truth about everything going on. You were the Blade's apprentice. You have a good legacy. What am I? A monarch put on the throne by a villain, and was one myself by betraying L'Manberg, that's what. That's not worth displaying with the heroes."

"So you're hiding?"

"I'm letting the spotlight linger on those who matter."

It was a strange moment when a king praised you above himself. Ranboo didn't know how to feel about it, therefore he didn't. He didn't pay attention to it. All his thoughts were for his friend and his friend alone.

"You're a good king," he repeated firmly, "better than good, even, and a good person. You're someone so many look up to—other leaders, your people, and me. Is that not enough to feel like you're worth something better than a place next to Schlatt, of all people?"

"Admiration is not the same as forgiveness," Eret replied.

That single soft sentence shattered Ranboo's entire argument. He fell quiet for a moment or two.

"And what if they do forgive you? What then?"

"I'll never know," he sighed, "because almost everyone I've wronged is already dead. It's too late for me, my legacy cannot be changed."

"But—"

"We'll all be remembered as we deserve to be. Whether it's in a good or a bad way, it doesn't matter; the point is that everyone will be remembered, no matter the seeds sowed. That's what I wanted to show you. People aren't talking about Technoblade right now, but they will again one day. They will tell his story and love him for years to come, and this museum will be the reason why."

Eret turned back to Ranboo and although the hybrid could see that his smile was sad, it was genuine. His heart ached to be able to help him, somehow.

"Go to Niki," the monarch insisted yet again, dashing all hopes of doing just that. "Go and help her, ask for her forgiveness. Don't leave any of it hanging. You might never get another chance. Don't plant the wrong seeds like I did. The smallest betrayal can end up going a long, long way."

Chapter Twelve: Sweet, Sweet Problems

Niki loved Ranboo, she really did, but by *gods* if that hybrid didn't infuriate her sometimes.

One moment, they'd be closer than ever, thicker than thieves and blood, and the next it was like he didn't even know her. She could have blamed his memory problems, but that was completely unfair—it wasn't the truth. Maybe once upon a time, that excuse could have held up. Not anymore. Ranboo was publicly proud of his ability to finally start controlling them a little.

No, this onslaught of ignorance was one of choice. The reason why was a relative mystery.

Adulthood probably had a hand in it somewhere. Ranboo had large responsibilities now. Responsibilities to a king, no less, that couldn't be disregarded. Back when he was a kid, he probably would have put her first. He always did. He had been the only one who had.

Those days were gone, however.

Great.

Fantastic.

Now he couldn't even stop for a second or two to lend an ear.

She didn't need to be escorted off palace grounds, she could walk very well on her own. The guards still insisted on occasionally prodding her in the back, to her annoyance. She let them know exactly what she thought once she was through the portcullis, almost biting their heads off. Still, a dismissal was a dismissal, and she knew it.

Briefly, she wondered if she should go back, force herself through the sentries and break into the castle itself. Wringing a certain enderman's neck was sounding pretty tempting right about now.

Her aching hand begged her to reconsider. The midday sun did also, reminding her earnestly that the bakery needed all the help it could get during the lunch rush.

More accurately, Velvet needed her, *desperately*. He made that clear as soon as she arrived. He was onto her the moment she set a foot behind the counter.

"Niki, this has to be the worst idea you've ever had."

She slipped on her apron and while fiddling with the strings pulled them a lot tighter than she meant to. "Not now, please."

"She doesn't listen to anything I'm saying, she's not following the cookbooks, she leaves messes and doesn't clean them up and—oh my *gods!*—if I hear her singing one more time, I think I'm going to bake myself into a pie."

She rolled her eyes and shot him a sideways glance. "You're being dramatic."

"Am I? We're getting complaints about the quality of our pastries, Niki! *Complaints!* We've never had any before!"

She tied up her pink hair in front of a mirror, again tugged everything painfully tighter than she usually did. "There's nothing wrong with a bit of constructive criticism."

"*Niki!*"

She threw her hands up into the air and spun around to face him. "Well, what else was I supposed to do?"

"I don't know, turn her in? She's a thief!"

"I couldn't do that!"

"Why not?"

"I just... couldn't!"

Velvet crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe, "Elaborate."

"She wasn't doing anything inherently wrong. She had a good reason to steal from us, and—"

"That doesn't change the fact that she still stole! And she was a part of the Eggpire, was she not?"

"Alright, you of all people know that excuse doesn't hold up anymore," she warned him sharply, flicking the ring on his finger as she pushed past him. "Anyway, she was only *infected*, not part of the Eggpire itself."

"Still, she tried to kill me."

"And it's a shame she didn't succeed."

It came out a lot harder than she had intended it to, and the tease itself was lost on the way. Velvet noticed too.

"What's gotten into you today?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." She unpinned an order list from the corkboard and quickly glanced at the day's workload. "Everything's fine."

"Fine, my ass. What's up?"

"Listen, I don't have the time or the patience to get into all that right now." She pinned the list back up. "The meringues aren't going to cook themselves."

She rolled up her sleeves. It turned out to be a bad idea.

"Wait, what happened to your hand?"

"Nothing."

She rolled them down again, tucking the bandage out of view once again. She hoped that Velvet wouldn't decide to probe further. She didn't need to wage yet another duel with him, for both their sakes.

Fortunately, he seemed to have gotten the message. "You do you," he sighed, "but *please* at least listen to me. Hiring Hannah was a mistake. Unless you can somehow fix it, our business will be in trouble."

"It can't be *that* bad."

"Want to bet? You know me, I don't complain about these sorts of things."

Velvet's tone was serious, miles more serious than it ever had been before. Niki finally took the hint.

"I'll take over," she decided, then took in Velvet's complexion. Messy red hair, aquamarine eyes sunken in and ringed with deep bags, and futile attempts at stifling a loud yawn. "You look dead."

"No, you think? I got back from the quarry trip to Las Nevadas this morning and barely slept, and as you can probably imagine my bakery shift wasn't as peaceful as I would have expected."

"You should go home and take a nap."

"Are you kidding? My legs will definitely not last all the way to the White Mansion." What seemed like a "no" at first soon became a cryptic "maybe" as Velvet loosened the strings on his apron and pointed towards one of the back rooms. "I'll just go crash with the flour for a couple of hours..."

Once he dragged his feet into his dreamland, Niki got down to business. She quickly finished serving a customer at the till before curiously biting into one of the inconspicuous looking cookies from that day's batch.

Immediately, her mouth was attacked by a sudden strike of sickening sweetness. She could feel her teeth rotting as she chewed and drowned in it, and her empty stomach harshly complained. She screwed up her face. Too much lemon, for sure, but above all there was too much sugar. Far too much sugar. At this point, they were selling more diseases and health issues than they were pastries and smiles. Velvet was right; she had to do something about it.

She finished the mouthful with some difficulty, washed it down with a glass of water and finally went to confront the culprit.

To be fair, Niki couldn't storm in and start berating Hannah. She didn't have the heart to, no matter how pent up she was.

Although technically speaking she was fulfilling a punishment, the flower fairy seemed to be as happy as a hummingbird in her new position. She fluttered from bowl to whisk, ingredients to oven and back again and hummed cheerfully as she went. She moved quickly, and to an outside eye it may have seemed like she knew exactly what she was doing. There was no

cookbook in sight. The supplies were running low and the stack of finished pastries was rising high.

It would have been a show of good work if half of the ingredients weren't strewn across the workspace and Hannah herself—wasted by carelessness—if the oven wasn't spitting out dangerously dark smoke and if any of the treats were actually edible beyond a single bite.

Niki leaned against the doorway and cleared her throat.

Hannah spun around immediately. Her face brightened and she waved. "Hi, Niki!"

"Hannah."

"I'm glad you're here. Velvet was *not* fun to work with. It was like someone had stolen his will to live and he had a thorned vine shoved up his ass."

As she rambled on, Niki suppressed a sigh. Either Hannah was totally oblivious to the disappointment in her greeting, or she had elected to completely disregard it. Niki had a feeling it was a bit of both.

"Where's the cookbook?"

"Cookbook?"

"The big, heavy book with all the recipes that you're meant to follow."

"Oh, I didn't need it anymore."

"Didn't need it anymore?"

"I have a very good memory. I only had to watch Velvet once to get the hang of things. Watch!"

As if to prove her point, she messily weaved a pretzel out of a long, uneven length of dough.

"Hannah," Niki sighed. "Please..."

"I also decided to take some liberties. The cookies weren't sweet enough, so I added a bit more sugar. After all, you do have a lot of it!"

They really needed to limit the fairy's access to that corner of the pantry.

"I also added a lot more of it to the pretzels."

"Pretzels are supposed to be salted—"

"Don't worry, I added both equally."

Niki's stomach churned at the very thought of the amalgamation that baking choice would have created. She prayed for the gods' clemency upon those who had bought them that morning.

"Please just use the cookbook," she implored, "and follow it to the letter, alright?"

Niki must have been far more stressed than she had first thought, because Hannah's simple, innocently upbeat reply set her off.

"Where's the fun in that?"

"*Fun*? You think that this is *fun*? What in the world makes you think you're here for *fun*? You stole from me and you're here to pay for it. Just be glad I didn't report you to both the Badlands and the Greater SMP. Count yourself lucky, not happy!"

The fairy's feet touched the ground and her wings folded behind her. She didn't flutter anymore. Her bright spark had disappeared.

"Don't they have bigger things to worry about than a couple of bags of sugar going missing?" Hannah stammered.

What would have been an insolent retort became a tentative question with her shift in tone, small and strained. Niki still couldn't care less.

"I have some influence in those governments, believe it or not. I could get them to reopen Pandora's Vault if I wanted them to."

Hannah's eyes grew wide and she shied away. "You wouldn't do that..."

Wouldn't she?

Niki couldn't think straight.

"Would you like to see me try?"

"For only *two* bags of sugar?"

"People have been imprisoned for a lot less. Not to mention that monster you're keeping as a pet."

"What monster?"

"The one that sucked up my blood!"

Niki stormed right up to her and thrust her bandaged hand in Hannah's face. It was stained. The wound underneath hadn't stopped bleeding.

Hannah's fear melted away almost immediately. She grabbed Nikki's wrist and gawked at her palm.

"My gods, is it really that bad? Don't worry, I know how to heal—"

Nikki stopped her. "I don't need your help," she hissed, yanking her arm away. "I don't need your pity. I just need you to do what you're told. Use the cookbook."

"I was only trying to help—"

"*Don't*. Stop sticking your nose in stuff you don't understand, like that thing and like my life. You will pay off your theft and then you'll stay out of my way, is that clear?"

She didn't even wait for an answer.

She was never one to swear, but for once; *fuck that*.

Fuck her.

Fuck everything.

"Niki, what happened in there?"

As it turned out, Velvet hadn't gone to sleep—or if he had, she had likely woken him up.

"Change of plans: you're taking over the bakery for the rest of the day."

"What did you do?"

"What did I do?" She turned to him, aghast. "What did I do? Are you on that little criminal's side now?"

"What? No, of course not! I'm just trying to—"

"Oh my gods, I wish everyone would stop using that word! Trying, trying, *trying*! Stop trying and just do it, or don't bother doing it at all!"

Her own words barely made any sense to her anymore. The bakery had never felt more cramped. She couldn't stay in it, furiously pacing back and forth like a raging tiger, or else she would explode even more than she already had.

She roughly thrust her apron into Velvet's hands. "I'm taking the day off."

"You're coming back tomorrow though, right?"

Niki didn't answer.

"You're coming back tomorrow, right? Niki, you're coming back tomor—?"

She slammed the bakery door behind her. The wooden frame shook, as did the glass windows set out on the front. The small brass bell inside swung wildly and almost flew off its hook entirely.

"Niki, is everything—?"

"Not now, Tubbo!"

She shoved past the ram and the other customers ambling up to the shop. She could feel their eyes tear her apart with questions as she marched off and down the Prime Path. She ignored every single one.

Her stress trickled out of her and burned, flaming streams of molten lava down the side of a volcano. As much as it was deadly and dangerous, she didn't want to scorch anyone in her wake.

There was only one person she knew who was completely fireproof.

"So, is anyone going to tell me what's up with Niki?" Tubbo asked, walking into the bakery. Michael stuck close to his flank, just as startled as everyone else was by Niki's flourished exit.

Velvet shook his head. "If you find out, please tell me."

"You've got to at least have an idea, right? You're the one who works with her. Did something happen between you two? A bag of almond financiers to go and two slices of cheesecake, please."

"No—well, yes. Or not really, but..." Velvet sighed and rang up his order. "It seems like she's mad at everyone. I thought she was a little off when she

first came in and I put it down to sleep deprivation, but I don't know anymore. I was hoping you could shed a bit of light onto all this."

"Why me?"

"You were close with her during L'Manberg's revolution, right?"

"We all were close, that doesn't mean we knew each other inside out." His words chased Velvet's attention as he briefly disappeared into the back of the shop, out of earshot. He returned a moment later, shaking out a paper bag. "Anyway, lots of people have changed since then and we haven't talked much..."

"You still must have *something* of an idea, right? Please, Tubbo, I'm desperate here."

"I'm afraid I don't, I'm sorry. After all these years, you definitely know her better than I do."

"That's what I thought you'd say..."

Velvet shoved the financiers unceremoniously into the back and tied it with a frown. He went to cut the cheesecake and box the slices up, and Tubbo changed his mind.

"We'll eat those now. We can stay for a bit, just in case Niki comes back. We can both talk to her then."

"You'd do that?"

"Of course, what are friends for?"

Diplomatic acquaintances, that is. Snowchester and the Badlands' relations were about to be informally bonified in both their books.

"Oh thank gods," Velvet cried, singing praises up to the heavens above and to the generous lamb below. "Please, make yourself at home."

He invited Tubbo and his son to take one of the little round tables in the corner of the bakery, put their tab on the house, brought them generous slices of cake and even threw in a complimentary lollipop that Michael eagerly unwrapped.

"If you need anything else, just shout," Velvet said.

He then rushed off to take care of the growing queue of customers, who had remained remarkably patient until then. In a matter of moments, it was as if Tubbo and Michael were completely forgotten. Their presence faded into the background of the bakery, invisible to all. That suited the ram fine, and he dug into his food.

"Velvet's cool," Michael decided suddenly, sloppily licking his candy. "Why can't you be cool like him?"

Tubbo scoffed. "Me, not cool? Where the heck did that come from? Does me not wanting to buy you tooth-rotting sweets make me lame?"

"Kind of," his son snickered back.

He knew he was playing on thin ice, and he relished in it. Of course, when it cracked it wouldn't become a pit of anger.

"Your own dad—the leader of Snowchester, ex-President of L'Manberg, undercover Pogtopia spy, hero with awesome battle-scars who defied death too many times to count—demoted to the title of "lame". I am appalled!"

He teasingly swiped his snout with the end of his fork, leaving a thick and fluffy trail of cream behind. Michael grunted and wiped it off.

"Okay, okay! I get it!" he laughed, ducking out of the way as another mouthful came straight towards him. His frantically jiggling trotters bumped Tubbo's sheep-legs under the table. "Tubbo, stop it!"

Tubbo backed off, satisfied. "That's Mister Lame to you," he joked.

"Exactly! Why are you using cake, you've got a dagger right there!"

"Well excuse me for not wanting to accidentally murder my own son."

"So you admit that you suck at using it."

"My gods, you're impossible!" Tubbo laughed fondly, ruffling the piglin's fur. "I'm guessing that Ranboo's the cooler and favourite parent then, right?"

"No."

He raised an eyebrow. "No?"

"He's not around as much. You are."

Michael's ears flattened against his head and he sunk down, his chin propped up between his folded arms. The lollipop now seemed to have lost his interest. He took it out of his mouth and twirled it aimlessly between his trotters.

Tubbo sighed and dropped his playful attitude. He lay a hand on his son's arm. "Michael, he's just busy."

"I know, but still..."

"He's a royal advisor to King Eret himself, remember?"

"And you rule Snowchester, and I still see more of you than him."

The ram sighed, knowing full well that the piglin had a point. "I know, I know... There's just not much that we can do about it."

"Can you talk to him?"

"I can try."

That seemed to brighten Michael up, but not by much. At least she started licking his lollipop again. Tubbo resumed eating, and for a while everything was quiet.

Then, Michael spoke again. "Do you miss Puffy?"

Tubbo swallowed a bit the wrong way and coughed. "I'm sorry?"

His son repeated the question; the same words, the same tone, the same heaviness. "Do you miss Puffy?"

Few things could ever soften his heart the way Michael's question did. He put the fork down and pushed the cheesecake a little out of the way. He smiled, a strange air of sadness still running through him.

"Of course, everyday. She's my mother after all."

It was a generic reply, too generic. Michael didn't react, staring aimlessly off into the vibrant neon green of his candy.

"But I know that she's got a good life somewhere else, and I've got my perfect life right here. It helps when you know that everyone's happy."

"Do you need her help, sometimes?"

"I've always done pretty well on my own without her for most of my life."

It was harsh to be sure, but the truth nonetheless. In the end everything he had become was of his own doing and that of his close friends—not that of an absent mother who finally reunited with him a few years far too late.

He loved her, but labeling her as family was starting to become a little harder than it should have. Her place as a mother to him seemed to have only lasted a few years at best. Now she was gone again, and Tubbo had grown up. He was without parents, and he was alright.

"And we still get letters, remember? She's not completely gone."

At the mention of their correspondence, Michael perked up again.

"Could you tell Michelle in the next letter that I got a free lollipop and that I'm cooler than her?"

"Why can't you write her one yourself?"

"I'm too busy," he whined.

"Busy? Busy doing what?"

"Stuff."

"Uh-huh, stuff... That checks out."

Stifling a smile, Tubbo wondered if there wasn't just something about cramming everything into one letter alongside his parents' own prose that just appealed far more than Michael was ready to admit. He couldn't blame him.

The opportunity to ask any more questions was revoked when Michael started gnawing on his candy again and attacking his slice of cheesecake. From the way he was savouring it, it was clear that he'd take a while.

Tubbo had all the time in the world. He could afford to linger a little and take a break. His nation could survive two seconds—or rather two hours—without him.

He couldn't remember the last time he had sat down somewhere that wasn't in his own home for a drink or a slice to eat. It was soothing to be away from normalcy and an unnecessarily strict routine. Things rarely happened in Snowchester anymore. The most serious incident that had taken place in a while had been a mysteriously rotting potato field, and even that had been

quickly solved when its farmer realized he had brewed the resistance potions for his crops wrong. Blizzards were usual occurrences, the SMP's great storm hadn't reached their shores and there hadn't been so much as a single peep of a criminal for years now. It was too quiet, too calm for him.

He used to be in charge of L'Manberg, the nation always at war, caught in every crossfire no matter how minuscule, and blown up every other day until there was nothing left for the TNT to touch. It was a constant uphill struggle to keep it running and thriving, but it was a challenge that kept him sharp and decisive, and above all occupied.

That was likely what he missed most from those days; the complete and utter absence of boredom.

Not that family life was a bore—Michael was the light of his life in every way and alleviated the mundaneness of the crawling days—but Tubbo wanted some *excitement* back in his life. It didn't need to be much either; just something small would do. A little spice here and there never hurt anyone.

Except maybe his taste buds.

There was something strange about the cheesecake. There were strange pops of flavour that weren't necessarily unpleasant, but certainly didn't belong there. In fact, if he didn't know any better, he would have said that his slice had come from another bakery entirely.

He soon found out why that was.

Someone stepped out from the back of the bakery, wings folded behind her back, eyes forward and flowers wilting. She dragged her feet silently across the floor, trying to creep behind Velvet's back as he took care of the counter. Tubbo had no idea that a new baker had been hired, and a flower fairy at that—although now the faint, unfamiliar odour of rose that hung in the air and in every bite of his slightly-overcooked cheesecake made sense.

Her shoulder knocked a basket of buns. Velvet turned to her, and frowned. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing." Her voice was small and toneless, in stark contrast to her bright and colourful appearance.

Tubbo could tell something was wrong, and so apparently could Velvet.

"Is everything alright?"

"I just need to find the cookbook." She made to scamper off with no questions asked.

"Hannah—"

She stopped and flinched. "I'm sorry!"

"What?"

"Are you going to yell at me?"

"It crossed my mind an hour or two ago, but no. Why?"

"Niki did."

Velvet sighed. "I'm not surprised, she's pretty agitated today. What did you do?"

The fairy lay her head on the edge of the counter, hand idly contouring the bell, "Lots of things."

"Like what?"

"I can't say."

"I see." Velvet finished ringing up another customer, and after closing the till drawer turned to her. "Tell you what, once the lunch rush is over I'll teach you how to make some proper cookies, alright?"

She perked up. "You'd do that?"

"Sure, why not? It's useful to know anyway, even without being forced to work in a bakery. You could also teach me how to add flower essence into things. Apart from being a bit burnt and way too full of sugar, your culinary skills are quite interesting."

"Oh, thank you!"

"There's only one condition: stay in the back, sit still and don't touch anything. You still stole from us, and I don't want it happening again. And remember, I'll know if you do it again, are we clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

Hannah dutifully snapped to attention and raised her rose covered hand in a serious salute, right before fluttering back into the back of the bakery and disappearing once again.

Tubbo caught Velvet rolling his tired eyes and hiding a little smile, muttering something under his breath. He served the next customers.

It was when he was counting out their money that his smile faltered. "This isn't enough."

"I'm sorry?" The bunny hybrid in front of him began tapping their foot against the floor, ears and cottontail anxiously twitching. "Are you sure?"

Velvet counted out the coins again. "This isn't enough," he confirmed.

"Not enough? But this is all we have!"

Velvet dropped the money back into the customer's hand, apologetic. "I'm really sorry. I would have let it go if it was a coin or two under, but not ten."

"Oh..."

"Step aside, Aims, I'll handle this."

Their friend stepped in front of them and snapped his fingers. Fire flared up in his palm, making the other customers shriek and step back. Velvet did too, visibly starting to sweat. Michael gawked at the flames, admiring, while Tubbo bristled and prepared to have to fight if needed, or grab his son under one arm and flee. Whichever came first.

"Greedy fuckers get what they deserve."

"I don't want any trouble," Velvet said, keeping his voice remarkably even despite the circumstances. He backed away a little more, towards a nearby sword propped up between two bread baskets. "Please just take your money back and leave my shop."

That was obviously out of the question. In any other circumstance, Tubbo would have probably backed Velvet up. Then, he took a closer look at the two strangers, at their grimy skin and awkwardly patched-up clothes. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen people in that state, and incidentally couldn't remember the last time he saw someone take any pity on them either.

Against his better judgement he stepped in, pulling out his purse. "It's alright, I'll pay for them."

Velvet only briefly mustered up the courage to glance in his direction.
"Tubbo, are you sure? You don't need to get involved—"

"Certain." Giving up on counting it all out, he handed the whole pouch over.
"In fact, give them whatever the rest of this will buy them."

Velvet still looked a little wary, but grasp around the hilt of the sword relaxed. He left it where it was and without dragging his sights away from the counter went and slipped two more loaves of bread into the basket.

The flames went out. The fireborn's threatening demeanour softened. He took the basket and mumbled a thank you. His friend on the other hand was frozen to the spot in fear, ears and nose twitching madly. It took a gentle nudge to jumpstart them again, and another one to get them to leave.

Tubbo followed them out onto the doorstep of the bakery.

It was once they were out in the fresh air that things took a friendlier turn. They leaned against the threshold, turning to look at the ram.

"Thanks for that," they sighed, deflating like a balloon. "You really helped us back there."

"It was nothing. I was honestly more worried about your friend here burning the whole establishment down. That's not how we work in the SMP anymore."

He cast a sidelong glance at the fireborn. He was double checking the content of the basket as if he was certain they'd been somehow ripped off. When he seemed relatively satisfied, he looked up. Two different coloured eyes, one so brown it was almost black and the other as red and flaming as the fire from his palm glared at Tubbo, eyeing him with as much suspicion as he did the bread.

He thanked him nonetheless with a little nod. "Yeah, that was decent of you."

"Next time, though, I wouldn't threaten Velvet."

"Why not?"

"Because he's married to a leader of the Badlands. You'd get much more than a strongly worded letter on your back if you killed Antfrost's husband."

"Too many names, too many kingdoms," the fireborn muttered.

"I think it's great that there are so many," the bunny piped up brightly.
"Especially when they're at peace, the collaborations must be great!"

"Yeah, you can say that," Tubbo agreed. He hadn't really thought about it before. Deals and meetings and friendly dinners between leaders were just another day to him.

The bunny held out their hand. Their cotton tail wagged back and forth, their long, floppy ears twitching. "I'm Aimsey, and that's Eryn."

Tubbo didn't shake Eryn's hand, for obvious reasons, but smiled at them both. "Tubbo," he introduced himself.

"So what do you do around here, Tubbo?"

"Well, I run a nation: Snowchester, in the Northern tundra."

"Fantastic," Eryn groaned. "Great going, Aims. Now they know our names if they want to arrest us."

Tubbo laughed. "What? No, don't worry. No one's going to arrest you for that. In the end, there was no harm done." Their meager knowledge regarding the SMP's governments did intrigue him, however. "You're not from around here, are you?"

Aimsey looked like they were about to open their mouth to speak, but Eryn got there first.

"We're just passing through," he explained. "Travelling. You know how it is."

"Where are you headed?"

A dismissive shrug was the only answer he got. Aimsey mirrored her friend, albeit a lot more apologetically.

"Wherever the wind blows, I guess."

"Well if you decide to pass through the SMP again, feel free to stop by Snowchester. It's a little cold, but you'll find some good company there, I'll make sure of that. And the bakeries are a little cheaper."

Aimsey cracked a smile and giggled. Eryn decidedly did not.

"We never pass through the same place twice," he told him. "But thanks for the offer, and for paying. We'll be leaving now."

The ram watched as he locked his friend's wrist in a cautious grip and began to edge them away from him, slowly and surely. One abrupt move and they'd probably bolt off at full speed like wild animals, never to be seen again. Tubbo stayed put and watched them go.

Aimsey turned back at the last second and flashed him a smile. "I hope we'll meet again soon!"

It had been a long time since someone had said that to him, least of all a complete stranger. Maybe it was nothing but a goodbye, or a polite request that would never come to fruition. But there was still a chance that it was something else—Tubbo might have just made another friend.

He couldn't remember the last time he had. Every time he'd try and take the first step, Tommy was there in one way or another. Often, it was in a bout of sadness. Other times, it was a sliver of guilt that weaved through his veins, and an irrational one that screamed at him that he was trying to replace Tommy, even if the ram didn't realize it.

He knew he wasn't, and yet he still bent to its will regardless.

Today, everything was clear. There were no regrets, no sinking feelings or strikes of culpability. That was a first.

Perhaps that was a good sign.

Perhaps it was the little bit of spice he was waiting for—and like the rose-scented cheesecake, it was strangely pleasant.

Chapter Thirteen: Crawling Mold

She found Sapnap sparring on his own in Kinoko's training grounds. It was one of the old but still used remains from the time of Dreams tyranny and the great battle that ensued. The fireborn was polishing off his lunges and uppercuts, slashing and scorching the straw training dummy before him. She felt a little sorry for it, until she admitted to herself that she was itching to do the same.

He noticed her approach. "Didn't expect to see you here. I've been waiting for a decent opponent."

Sapnap tossed her a sword from the weapon rack. She caught the hilt in one hand and tested the weight. Sapnap swung his own blade around and over his head. He beckoned her forwards. She was more than happy to oblige and didn't waste a second.

Niki ran towards him at full speed and only just missed cutting off his head by hair's breadth. Sapnap caught her blade with his and chuckled nervously. She kicked him in his armoured stomach. He skid backwards against the earth and only just missed losing his balance.

"You're pretty feisty today," he noted.

"Is it that obvious?"

Through gritted teeth she swung back and forwards again, crashing their swords together with the strength of a thunderstorm. The fireborn braced the impact, his heels digging into the dirt.

He smirked, pushing her back. "I meant that as a compliment."

"How flattering. Now let me have this."

They roughly crossed blades and exchanged blow after blow, one after the other in perfect harmony; all of them calculated, all of them unnecessarily violent.

"You're tense."

She didn't reply, except for an angry huff.

He tried again. "Want to talk about it?"

"No point."

"You sure? Might help."

"There's nothing to say." She shoved him backwards. "It won't solve anything."

"Still, do tell."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, humour me."

"Fine!" She locked their swords together and leaned forwards until she was only a couple of inches from the fireborn's face. "I caught a fairy stealing from the bakery, then she tore open my hand, led me on a wild goose chase and messed up the only job I gave her to redeem herself—and she's still all smiles and butterflies and rainbows and I *don't know why!*"

Her hits became harder and harder for Sapnap to parry. He was knocked to the floor and he rolled away just in time to cover himself with a shield. She continued to beat down her blade time after time again like a hailstorm, punctuating each one of her short and furious words.

"I'm sick and tired of being led around like this!"

"I bet you are!" His cries were more encouraging than anything.

Niki was fuming. "She's so happy and lovable and innocent and I'm the one coming out of the bad guy!"

"Yes, Niki! Keep going!"

"I feel like I'm the bad guy and—and—"

Her bandaged hand screamed in pain. She dropped a sword and staggered back, her body now aching and rendered completely breathless. She collapsed and landed on her back, eyes to the sky.

It was blue and clear. with faint wisps of clouds. The sun's rays were warm. The dusty pebbles scattered around the training ground dug into her spine, the backs of her legs and her arms. Small patches of grass tickled her skin. She could feel every single bit of it, every single sensitive morsel of the world. Despite her heart racing at a million miles per hour, she was calm. Tranquil, as if nothing mattered anymore.

A shadow loomed over her, blocking her view.

"Better?"

She took a deep, shuddering breath, momentarily closing her eyes. She nodded.

"Better."

Sapnap pulled her up and helped brush her down. "Glad to hear it."

Niki notices a small red nick on his cheek. The fireborn followed her eyes and touched the bleeding spot.

"Yeah, that was you."

"Sorry."

"It's fine, no real harm done. That's more than I can say for the shield though." It was completely dented and the sword was in great need of a visit to the blacksmith's as well. "Doesn't matter either. Nothing beats letting off a bit of steam."

He was certainly one to talk. It was still obvious that many of Kinoko's buildings were newer than others.

"Yeah, I guess it is," she sighed. "I should do it more often."

"You should. You'd be a lot you'd be a lot less stuck up."

She punched his arm. "I'd be up to it if you were the regular punching bag."

"Actually, I changed my mind. You should stay pent up: it suits you."

"Coward."

"Sadist."

It probably would have ended in another, decidedly more friendly scuffle if both of them weren't already black and blue all over. Instead they stared each other down until one, then both cracked up and laughed it off.

"Now, what do you need?"

"Do I have to need something?"

"I doubt you came all the way to Kinoko just to kick my ass. You're not like that at all, even though you're pretty good at pretending you are."

She stuttered for a second. Had she come for something else?

She searched for an answer in his face. His deep blue eyes stared back, patient and awaiting a reply. The longer she stared the more their colours started to morph. The deep blue darkened even more. A bright swell of turquoise took over, spinning like a typhoon before bleeding and filling out his irises. As it settled, the colour sparkled dimly, so dimly that it looked like it was pulsating and writhing.

It looked alive. Just like the mold.

The mold that feasted on life itself.

She snapped out of it. His eyes were unchanged, except for in her own mind. He was still waiting.

"Yeah, I do actually," she realized. "I need your help with something."

"Just because I can summon fire doesn't mean I know how to perfectly blowtorch a *crème brûlée*."

"What, no, why—I'm not coming to you for baking tips!" Gods knew she had hired enough troublesome help to last a lifetime. "Not everything's about the bakery."

"There goes my guess, then. I'm completely clueless."

"I'm calling on our Syndicate pact, Herostratus. You have to answer."

"I don't recall that ever being a thing."

"Well it is now."

"This must be pretty serious, then."

"It is, trust me."

He still seems skeptical, crossing his arms and adopting a relaxed dance. A lazy smirk marred his face with an air of indifference.

"I bet you my sword that it's not as serious as you're making it out to be."

"Well, fuck me."

"I'm waiting for that sword, Sap."

He was definitely not about to part from it anytime soon. He kept a fierce hold on the hilt. His gaze was glued just as strongly to the sight before him.

He cautiously toed a single brown feather on the ground, the only remains of a fresh sparrow carcass that they had found on the way. It landed on the edge of the mold. It was promptly swallowed as well.

"Fuck me," he repeated, no louder than a murmur. It was less of a shock now and much more of a quiet admission of fear.

Niki couldn't draw her eyes from it either. "What do you think it is?"

"You tell me!"

"I have no idea! That's why I'm asking *you*!"

"You really think I know what it is? Absolutely not."

"Are you sure? Kinoko's forests are full of plants, are you sure you haven't seen any—"

"Niki, I think I would remember encountering one like this. Have you tried destroying it?"

"If it's anything like the Egg, then it's not as easy as it looks."

The carpet seemed almost embedded into the ground itself, making it impossible for anyone to dig their nails under it and try to tear it up. Poking it with a stick or a sword was out of the question as well. Sapnap even tried placing a flaming hand on it; the most the moss did was contour his charred handprint. It grew back over the scorched patch with ease a moment afterwards.

"We could try with soul sand," Niki suggested.

"There's no point, I don't think."

"No point?"

"Nope; I think we're completely fucked when it comes to this one."

"That's what we thought with the Egg, and—" She did a double take, the fireborn's switch in tone finally getting through to her. "Why are you so nonchalant about all this?"

"It can't be as dangerous as the Egg."

"How do you know?"

"Have you seen anyone around the SMP that looks infected?"

She hadn't. "That still doesn't mean it's not a threat."

"We know exactly two things about it: it feasts on dead animals and stray blood. That just sounds like a regular carnivorous plant to me."

"And yet you're holding that sword out like it's your only chance of survival."

"Maybe it isn't."

Sapnap sheathed his weapon. Any and all previous fear seemed to have dissipated and he regained his confident bearings. Niki bit her tongue. It took every ounce of her self-restraint not to light another worrying fuse.

"We're completely fucked, but we can't do anything about it, and maybe we don't have to," he decided. "As far as we can tell, it's not incredibly dangerous."

"Yet."

"Yet," he nevertheless agreed. "And I think we won't know for a while yet."

That was definitely not the answer she expected or even wanted to hear. "Are you saying we should just wait?"

"Wait and see what else it does, if anything? Yeah, I am."

"Great, thank you Sapnap," she huffed, crossing her arms. She glared daggers at the moss. "What in the world would I do without you..."

"Probably run yourself down a self-destructive path and off a cliff."

"What?"

Sapnap turned fully to her, his back to the moss. Niki almost let out a strangled cry—she would have definitely not had the courage or stupidity to do the same. If anyone was trying to doom themselves between the two of them, it'd be the fireborn, no doubt about it.

He seemed to think otherwise. "You're missing something inside you, and I'm here to stop you doing something stupid because of it."

"What are you talking about? What thing?"

"I don't know, I'm not you. All I can tell is that there's something: a hole, a lost puzzle piece, even just a little atom that needs some tweaking. I've seen it in you since the battle."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"No, why would I have? We were all pretty weird after that, I thought it was normal. But now years down the line, I feel like it hasn't disappeared. I see it in you when you're angry and stressed, and I can see it now with how you're reacting to this thing."

Sapnap tapped the moss with the end of his boot. Niki frowned.

"So I'm not allowed to be worried about it?"

"It's more than that, I can tell, more than this moss and that fairy."

"I don't—"

"Is everything alright?"

"I said—"

"Answer honestly, Nemesis. This is my own Syndicate pact, and you have to respect it. I just want a reply. Is everything alright?"

Niki dragged her gaze from Sapnap's. She thought about it. Her hand came to clutch her arm and she bit the inside of her cheek. She hung her head.

Her reply was barely audible. "No," she whispered.

"Could you tell me about it?"

She understood what her friend was saying. As soon as he had mentioned it, she felt it, that hole, knot, crack, whatever it was, deep inside her. However, she wasn't quite ready to face it. Not yet.

"No." Her reply was a little louder, a little more sure of herself this time.

"Okay."

Unlike his usual, teasingly nosy self, Sapnap didn't push or pry any further. Part of her wished he had. She wanted him to. She'd rather have the whole thing, whatever it was, pulled from her by force. At least it'd be out.

"I'm here if you ever do."

She nodded quickly in response, too quickly. She realized when he frowned, and she changed the subject.

She spotted something running towards them through the forest trees at full speed. Birds flew from their roosts, the undergrowth rustled and tore beneath its swift and violent pace.

"Uh, Sap..."

The fireborn turned around and leapt out of the way just in time.

A black and white blur burst out of the bushes and tripped into the cliff, landing in a topsy-turvy pile of lanky arms and legs by Niki's own feet, all tangled together by a long tail topped with a furry brush. The whole amalgamation heaved with panting breath. The moss sneakily crept around it, lapping up the small drops of blood staining the ground from a scuffed knee.

The clumsy pile looked up with mismatched green and red eyes. Their drugged stare of exhaustion soon became one of surprise and sheepish apology. Looking down at Ranboo now, Niki could almost imagine he was but a young teen again. It softened her heart considerably.

"Hey, Niki," he greeted with a wobbling tone.

"Hey."

"Gods, Ranboo, that was one hell of an entrance!"

Sapnap helped the hybrid up and brushed him down a little. Ranboo did the same, untangling his tail and checking that every part of him was where it was supposed to be.

"Niki was just telling me how you ignored her this morning."

She spluttered, suddenly red in the face. "Sap—"

Ranboo crossed gazes with Niki again, and immediately dropped what he was doing.

"About that... Niki I'm sorry." He was still panting and the gulp he swallowed down was loud and deep. "I don't expect you to forgive me. I was an arrogant idiot who put work above you and I'm sorry. That's not who I want to be. You mean everything to me, you both do. I need to start remembering that, even if I have to write an entire book to not forget."

"I forgive you."

"|—"

"I forgive you."

Niki's whole demeanour had been mellowed, and it changed her outlook whether it should have or not. Either way, there was no point in falling out with him over something so small, especially since apparently there was nothing they could do about it.

Apparently.

She was still ninety percent sure that Sapnap was downplaying it all. At least now she could get a second opinion.

"What do you make of this?"

She grabbed Ranboo's wrist and pulled him back so he could get a better view of the moss. He looked down and instead of shock his face twisted into one of disgust.

"What is that?"

"I don't know but it drinks blood and feasts on the dead."

"Niki thinks it's a threat," Sapnap said, his two cents earning him a glare.

"And you're dumb enough to think it's not."

"It's not doing anything inherently wrong."

"What, like eating flesh?"

"Lots of carnivorous plants do, that doesn't mean they're a danger."

"That doesn't mean they're harmless either!"

Ranboo, ever the diplomat, stepped in. "What you're saying is you don't know much about it."

"We know the facts," Niki corrected.

"It doesn't sound like you know *all* of them. It'd be like knowing that Dream advocated for a peaceful and unified realm and deciding to brush over the fact that his means of doing so included mass murder."

No one tended to use the Nightmare's name lightly anymore, especially from the very lips of a fragile and sensitive soul such as Ranboo.

Niki saw Sapnap's eye twitch, but otherwise he was as still as stone. "What do you suggest we do, then?"

"The only thing we can do is keep an eye on it."

His gaze hardened, brow furrowed in concentration. Niki could almost hear him thinking, planning and strategizing as swiftly as logically as a king would, or someone who worked closely with one.

"We can make a vow to scout out this patch whenever any of us happen to pass by, or maybe we should set up a watchdog program—"

"A watchdog program? In our Badlands?"

Neither of the three spoke, frozen where they stood. The underbrush rustled, and someone stepped out.

Antfrost's whiskers twitched in undeniable amusement. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were planning some sort of coup."

The laughs that followed were nervous, too nervous not to spark suspicion, even if there was reasonably none to be had.

"A coup? Absolutely not," Ranboo chuckled. Niki could almost see the sweat running down his neck.

"Oh yeah, no, we're just having a friendly chat," Sapnap agreed, straightening his posture.

"On our land?"

"The borders are open, aren't they?"

"I'd be careful if I was you. Out of context conversations and strangely secretive meetings bode nothing good." Antfrost glanced from one to the other, then down at the floor. His eyes widened. "All of you, step back," he ordered.

They did as they were told with no questions asked. The cat knelt down and unsheathed a single claw. He tore it down the middle of the moss, splitting it apart. A gooey string of phosphorescent blue sap stuck to his paw as he pulled away. Niki, Sapnap and Ranboo shared a concerned look, but said nothing.

"Can you at least tell us what that is?"

"That's the thing: we don't know. No one knows, and until then no one should mess with it."

He cut out a small circle of the moss with the tip of his claw and popped it in a vial he took from his pocket. He corked it, stood up, and again looked at each of them in turn.

"This section of the Badlands is off limits to outsiders until further notice."

Outsiders?

The term was harsh, as was his demand. It took Niki aback.

"Ant, what do you—"

"Do *not* argue with me. I am your friend, Niki, but I am above all a leader of this realm. What I say goes."

"Really, Ant?" Sapnap butted in, incredulous. "We're not doing anything wrong—"

Antfrost let out a breathy hiss. They all retreated a couple of steps. No one had heard or seen the cat do so since the the troubled years of the SMP had ended.

"You will obey the laws of these lands," he spat to the fireborn, catching everyone else in the venomous crossfire for good measure, "or else I will take this matter to an international trial. I don't think your husband-to-be or your boss—" He glanced at Ranboo. "—would be very happy to learn you were purposely trespassing, now would they?"

Sapnap was still standing strong, but Niki saw him flinch. Ranboo hung his head, and bowed in submission.

"Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes," they all echoed in unison, as obedient and downtrodden as children. They would have all probably added Ant's title at the end as an extra mark of solemnity, if the Badlands' leaders had any, that was.

"Good. Now, I'm sure you all have places to be, and so do I."

Sapnap and Ranboo didn't argue. They left the clearing in silence. Niki was about to follow them.

"Niki."

She looked around.

Ant's expression had noticeably softened. "Pass the message on to Velvet. My order goes for him too. I don't want him to come to any harm."

There was no telling what would happen if she opened her mouth. Either a storm or a stream would gush out, and it was a well known fact that cats did not like water.

"I trust you, Niki, and so does Velvet. We don't know what we'd do without you."

She merely nodded. Antfrost bid her a warm but stern farewell, and they both went their separate ways.

She rejoined her companions on the Prime Path. They only spoke when all three of them were certain that they were out of earshot of everything and everyone.

"Not a threat, huh Sapnap?"

The fireborn was fuming. "He's as frantically delusional as you are."

Niki crossed her arms. "You're still not in the least bit worried?"

"Ant knows more than we do, that's for sure," Ranboo remarked quite rightfully, and Niki was glad he was on her side.

Sapnap, clearly, still wasn't. "I don't know what to think," he grumbled. They weaved between the market crowds lining the road the further they ventured into the Greater SMP. Niki briefly stopped at a stall and bought a couple more vials of vanilla extract. "All I know is that I'd rather not be caught up in drama in the week leading up to the happiest day of my life."

Niki fully let the guilt sink in. Between Hannah and the flesh-eating moss, she had completely forgotten about the SMP's biggest upcoming event. That meant that Velvet and her would have to rush to finish the catering orders as well. She paid for an extra portion of vanilla just in case.

"I completely forgot about that," she admitted as they walked away. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have dragged you into this."

"It's fine." The fireborn gave her a smile. "I'd do anything to help a good friend."

Niki's own mouth twitched upwards, no matter how much she tried to stop it. "Even if she's wasting your time?"

Sapnap wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "*Especiall*y if she's wasting my time," he agreed with a grin.

He tackled Ranboo down to his height as well and with his warm arms latching onto both of them, there was nowhere to run. The three of them knocked heads, and Niki laughed. Ranboo did too, then like Sapnap closed his eyes and leaned into the friendly familiarity. They continued walking, and the world had never seemed brighter.

"I've been thinking," Sapnap mused, interrupting their comfortable silence. "Would you guys be up for a little pre-wedding party?"

"A stag night?" Niki asked.

"Yeah, or whatever they call it. Haven't seen many being done around here, and it looks like fun. It doesn't have to be anything completely crazy either—although I mean, if Las Nevadas was still open I would have suggested we gamble away everything we own and run naked through the strip together."

Niki quietly thanked the gods that wasn't the case.

"But, y'know, we could still do something cool. There's a nice spot in the Kinoko forest we can camp in for a night. There's a river nearby in case we want to fish, more than enough wood to make a bonfire, and we'll get a great view of the stars when they come out. Nothing beats camping out in the open air. It'll be fun."

"Oh, I don't know," Niki teased with an airy sigh. "A whole night with you? I couldn't think of anywhere else I'd rather *not* be."

His heavy gloved hand ruffled her hair affectionately. "Oh, you don't have a choice, and neither do you, Ranboo. This is now an official Syndicate assignment, and you can't shy away."

Niki wondered for a moment if Technoblade would have scolded them by now. Using the Syndicate's name so lightly and conveniently almost felt like a crime, an easy excuse to get one's way all while sullyng the memory of its core mission.

Perhaps, if the secret society had in fact been an army of boisterous men and beasts, it wouldn't have felt so sacrilegious. The cries of glory would be ceaseless.

In the name of the Syndicate...

By order of the Syndicate...

Long live the Syndicate!

Its existence wouldn't have felt so sacred. It would have been thrown around willy-nilly anywhere and everywhere, no matter the moment. Then again, the Syndicate was more than a simple society. In the underground meeting room, behind the mask of secrecy their code names had stretched over each of them, Niki had found a family.

There was nothing wrong about proudly being a part of it.

Niki ruffled Sapnap's hair back. "We wouldn't dare," she agreed. "We're a team, and we stick together."

Even if many didn't end up staying.

"We stick together," Ranboo vowed in turn, his whole face brightening up.

Coming from him, the ever loyal and lovable enderman hybrid, the words had never rung truer. He, like Niki, would do anything for them.

"Fantastic!" Sapnap cried.

In a couple of minutes, the moss and Antfrost's order had been swiftly forgotten by everyone.

Almost everyone.

Even in between the friendly banter, Niki couldn't help but tune into the small part of her that was still being chewed to the bone. It was a little bug that reminded her not everything was as fine as it seemed.

Sapnap still couldn't see that. She had a feeling that even Ranboo didn't know or understand the whole thing either, and was cautiously flitting between what both of them had to argue.

Antfrost knew something about that mold. She didn't know what exactly, but if his reaction was anything to go by, then it was nothing good. It shouldn't have been as frightening as it was, but this was the Badlands, after all.

The last questionable growth from that nation that everyone had ignored ended up taking over most of the SMP. Even as she walked the Prime Path, Niki could still clearly see the landscape from years ago, dug up from buried memories and projected on the world around her today.

The Egg's thorny vines and slimy tendrils snaking around and choking everything in its path like a boa, squeezing life and sanity out of everything it

touched. The world was red, far redder than it had been when the bloody spoils of war littered every knoll and ditch.

Now she imagined the same thing, but a dark turquoise. The moss had no sprouts or tendrils; it was a dark blanket that moulded itself to its subject's shape. Everything it touched was consumed, draped in a glittering, impenetrable veil. The whole SMP was silent, frozen, as if it had all been turned to stone by a gorgon's gaze.

Somehow, the dead, blue scenario was more terrifying than the prospect of the return of the crimson, writhing and wriggling one.

She couldn't just leave her home to die, once again.

The Badlands had made it clear that trespassers in their forests were unwelcome now.

But as Technoblade would have once put it; rules were meant to be broken.

Chapter Fourteen: Loving Hearth

Back when the affectionately nicknamed "Bench Trio" was a thing, a silly little pact had been made.

"When one of us gets married," Tubbo decided one day as they lay on their backs in an open barley field, "the other two will give him the best stag night of his life."

"Yeah," Tommy agreed. "We'll all get fucking wasted and persuade him to rethink his life choices."

"Make him regret ever proposing—"

"—or saying yes."

"Really drill in the guilt that he'll no longer be a part of our group as he once was, and remind him that his freedom will become nothing but a luxury now once he's binded by a ring."

"There will be so many tears," Tommy sighed wistfully.

"So many," Tubbo agreed maliciously. He cackled with glee.

Ranboo had said nothing, but laughed. Looking back, he couldn't help but laugh again.

Their young teenage youth was definitely *something*. It was marked by quirky promises and friendly revenge in the midst of all the military coups, betrayals and very real vengeance, and that was what truly made it all glow. All those silly, nonsensical moments and vows had meant the world to them. Ranboo, sadly, wished they had come true.

Tommy's death had dashed all hope that they would. Even if Tubbo and Ranboo had fulfilled any with just two of them, it wouldn't have been the same. They wouldn't be keeping the promises. They'd be simply creating imperfect imitations of them.

When Tommy died, all the dreams they had about their upcoming adult life died too.

Ranboo didn't fight his mind too hard to remember that, although like many other darker thoughts, the memory came and went as it wished. Sapnap's stag night invitation only brought it back stronger than ever.

Where there had once been three, there were now two, and those two stuck together through thick and thin. Best friends, partners in crime and joint fathers who loved each other and their son more than anything. They made it through the dark woods of grief together, and even with one foot barely out the other side couldn't bear to be apart.

Ranboo liked sharing a home and a bed almost as much as he liked sharing stories and hugs.

Tubbo would jokingly tell people they were married, although that would be largely a lie. That didn't stop them from playing into it ever-so often.

"Honey, I'm home!"

He flung open the front door, letting the frigid air and the snow chill the cabin walls that had tried so hard to keep it out. Tubbo popped his head around the corner where the kitchen stood.

"Hi honey, had a nice day at work?"

"You know how it is." Ranboo hung his cloak on the peg behind the door and went to warm his hands by the fireplace. "Lots of paperwork, lots of meetings."

Lots of paranormal plants.

"Sounds stressful."

You have no idea.

"A usual day, really."

He rubbed his palms. They stung like hell. He winced, and Tubbo noticed.

"Gods, what happened to you?"

"I fell."

"From what, a castle tower?" The ram checked his hands and his torn kneecaps. The skin was raked and bleeding, encrusted with shards of rocks and dirt. "Sit down, I'll take care of those."

Ranboo didn't argue. He obliged, pulling a stool up by the fire while Tubbo went off to get the first aid pouch.

Ranboo couldn't remember the last time he had been actually hurt. Sure, there were small bruises and scratches that materialized here and there from stupid little accidents, but the hybrid took care of them himself. Any water burns as well, although that was more to avoid Tubbo yelling at him for going outside without a coat.

But injuries that worried the ram so much he took it upon himself to clean them himself? Now those were rarer. In fact, they hadn't come about since the SMP was still at war.

Tubbo's hands were clumsy, but gentle. Ranboo's knees and palms were gently cleaned by a cloth soaked in oily ointment. To distract himself from the aching, he began to talk.

"I've been invited to Sapnap's stag night."

"Really? That's awesome!"

Tubbo popped the cork of a small vial of Healing, poured some onto the handkerchief and applied it. Immediately, the perpetual stinging disappeared, and Ranboo was soothed.

"Want me to close any outstanding diplomatic deals between Snowchester and Kinoko while I'm at it?" he joked.

"No, absolutely not. Leave any and all work to me. Enjoy yourself."

Ranboo agreed with a hum. He could have tried to make it sound a lot happier, in hindsight.

Tubbo looked up at him, wet cloth hanging a few inches above his palm. Warm ointment continued to drip down, pooling in the hybrid's open palm.

"I'll be completely honest, I've never understood why you and Sapnap are so close."

"We *did* beat the Egg together. That was certainly something."

"That can't be all. I know it's not all." He went to wash out the cloth. "I feel like you're going to tell me one day that you're both part of a secret club I never knew about."

Ranboo let out a nervous laugh. "Why would you think that?"

Tubbo shrugged, "Just a guess."

"Dad, look!"

Ranboo struggled to suppress the hiss of pain that escaped him when his son crashed into his arms. Michael pressed his hand on his aching knee and thrust a colourful page in his face. Ranboo took it and got a better look. His heart swelled.

"Is that me?"

Michael nodded, then pointed to the comically shorter stick figure next to the proportionally odd, long and lanky one. "And there's Tubbo!"

Ranboo had already humourously guessed that from the exaggerated curly horns that looped an unnatural number of times. "And that little pink blob?"

"That's me!"

"And you're the still cutest thing I've ever seen."

Ranboo pulled his son in close and placed a deep, loving kiss on the top of his head. He closed his eyes. To think that their little, happy family could be put into one single abstract stick figure drawing, on one single page, bursting with so much love and colour. It was nothing short of a blessing.

He was only snapped out of it when the little piglin in his arms squirmed and squealed with laughter.

Tubbo took a look at the picture himself. "Hey, I'm not that short!"

"Bet?" Ranboo teased, heaving Michael onto his lap. The piglin sat there with crossed arms and a smug look on his face.

Tubbo stroked Michael's ear, then dragged his hand down to his cheek. He parted the fur there with his fingers, peering closely.

"I'm not going crazy, then," he mused, thumb tracing the small patch of bone still visible. "It's getting better."

"What is?" Ranboo asked.

"Michael's skin infection."

"Skin... infection?"

"I was reading up about a potato blight and the ways to cure it, and the book mentioned that the same disease can be found in the Nether, and it tends to provoke a rotting skin infection in piglins. Basically, zombie piglins aren't zombies at all. I asked Antfrost, and he confirmed it. Once they're out of the heat of the Nether, the parasites die out and the body starts to heal itself. It's slow, but it happens."

"I never knew that."

"I told you about it."

"I probably forgot."

The ram smiled. "Or you didn't listen in the first place. You had your nose buried in some papers and never brought it up again."

Ranboo's face fell, "Sorry."

"It's fine." Tubbo gave Michael a gentle headbutt that he reciprocated with a grunt. "You're busy, I'm busy, that's just what a life of government and duty is like for us. We can't exactly escape it."

That didn't mean that they couldn't make an effort—that Ranboo couldn't make an effort.

Duty was somewhat of a dangerous thing, sometimes even more dangerous than the wars raged between nations and the blades wielded by villains. Sometimes it was even the cause of them. The more important the responsibility, the more venom poisoned its bearer. It rotted man and beast

to their core, their morals turning into nothing but dust. A noble and honest desire to govern or protect could become an empty one, its fulfillment by any means necessary the only shred of happiness, relief and success. Duty turned golden hearts into stone, killed countless in futile fights, broke friends, lovers and families apart. It dug trenches.

Maybe Ranboo was simply weak-minded. Tubbo was running Snowchester alone, and he was more present in Michael's life than him. Ranboo was one of King Eret's many, many advisors. He was just one of the many cogs in the Greater SMP's machine. If he faltered, it wouldn't matter as someone would pick up behind him until he got back on his feet. Still, somehow, he was too busy to listen properly or even bother remembering the things that mattered. It was a thought that troubled him all throughout dinner, his nightly routine as he tucked in Michael and tightened his chest as he lounged in front of the fire.

"What happened to you today?"

Tubbo sat beside him. He wrapped a blanket around their shoulders and offered him a mug of hot chocolate. Ranboo knew he wouldn't be able to hide it all for much longer. Not all of it.

He shrugged. "A lot. It's alright, honest."

"Yeah, like hell. Come on, you can tell me."

The ram gave him a headbutt. The hybrid sighed.

"I just... Tubbo, am I bad?"

"Bad?"

"A bad father, a bad friend... just *bad*."

Tubbo's eyes blazed as fiercely as the fire. "Who do I need to kill?"

"No one," Ranboo spluttered, quickly reaching to hold him down. He secured the ram in his lap, his chin on his head and his body imprisoned between his long legs. It was both an attempt at calming Tubbo down and himself with a long needed cuddle.

The ram grumbled. "No one said anything?"

"No one, I swear. At least not directly."

"What, so did someone insinuate it yes or no?"

The tips of Ranboo ears burned. He wasn't making any sense and he knew it. "Never mind," he said, "forget about it."

He often wished that everyone had the same short-term memory as he had. It would have made awkward situations like this one a lot better to bear. Tubbo didn't say anything and they sat in silence, drinking the cocoa and basking in the warmth of their homely little cabin. Outside, the snowflakes swirled with the stars. The hot chocolate and generous amount of whipped cream melted pleasantly on his tongue.

Tubbo suddenly spoke up. "You're not a bad father," he said. "You're one of the best. You're certainly better than mine."

"Sam? Phil?"

"Schlatt."

Ah.

"Then again you can't do worse than Schlatt. No one can do worse than *Schlatt*. I mean, he literally planned my own execution—that's a sign of failed parenting, if you ask me. Still, even the others weren't perfect. Phil and Sam did, and still do, have their flaws. They were not perfect parents. No one is. No one teaches it to you like they do History or fighting skills. You pick it up as you go. You're doing your best, and it's great—better than great, even. There's no one else I'd rather raise Michael with, and he'll back me up on that. You're not the best that's ever been and you're certainly not the worst. You're you. You have the kindest heart I've ever met and we love you; that's all that should matter."

He nudged him, making Ranboo smile a little. "You really think Michael thinks that?"

Tubbo gestured to the picture now hanging proudly on the wall. "I think our little artist expressed that more than enough, don't you?"

There was nothing that screamed more love to Ranboo from his son than the tender gaze in his eyes when he looked at him. Being immortalized alongside him and Tubbo as a happy little stick figure was nothing short of an honour.

"And if you were a bad friend, I'd tell you right now that we wouldn't be living together."

That made Ranboo scoff audibly. "Alright, I get it."

He didn't, not entirely, but Tubbo wasn't angry at him. That was something, at least. He felt a bit better. He still sighed, tail weaving around Tubbo's leg.

"What's up?" the ram asked with a slight tilt of his head upwards.

Ranboo shrugged, avoiding his gaze. "I've just never been to one before."

"One what?"

"Stag party."

"Is that what all of this is about?"

"No, but I might do something wrong."

"Wrong? At a stag party, one of the wildest nights you'll ever have in your life? Come on, Boo. As Tommy would say, a bottle of alcohol a day keeps the party going all night."

Ranboo scoffed, "He didn't even *like* alcohol."

"He drank it anyway though, didn't he? Big Man Tommy liked to try Big Man things." Tubbo chuckled, then looked down at his healing work. Ranboo saw his eyes darken, staring into nothing with no spark or flash of acknowledgement. He knew that look. "I know I say this all the time, but I miss him..."

Tommy.

He was still there, always with them, as a saddening memory rather than a living, breathing boy. Any and all expectation of another ghostly apparition, after five years of hopeful searching, had been dashed. Ranboo still couldn't wrap his head around the workings of the spirit realms, but he knew deep down that Tommy had his time. He wasn't going to come back. That didn't stop him from looking, though.

"I miss him too."

Ranboo held Tubbo closer to his chest and rubbed his cheek against the rough bumps of his horns, liking the comforting texture.

"Do you think he'd be proud of us?"

"Tommy? Proud?" Ranboo couldn't help but laugh. "He'd probably make fun of us for being domestic and lame."

"Out loud, definitely. But secretly, I think he'd be happy with how we turned out."

The hybrid reflected for a second and, humorously, had to admit that it wasn't too far of a stretch. "Yeah, maybe he would be, deep down."

"Deep down," Tubbo agreed.

That was where they left it, for now. Despite the happy times, there were a few things that could still get the waterworks flowing. Ranboo's tears always burned like liquid fire across his skin; he tried to keep him at bay whenever possible.

Tubbo cleared his throat and picked up their empty mugs. "Maybe we should get some sleep. You coming?"

"In a moment."

There was something he wanted to do first.

Once Tubbo had trotted up the stairs to their bedroom and the fire had dwindled to a smoking pile of embers, Ranboo sat down at his writing desk. He opened his memory book.

Today was a wake-up call. I haven't had one of those in a while. Where to start?

Eret is not a villain. He made a big mistake, long ago, but he's owned up to it. He's aware of it, and he recognised what he's done. He's even apologized publicly. Multiple times. I even wrote one of those speeches once. But that's not what makes him good-hearted. I heard that Dream recognized what he had done was apparently sorry just before he was killed, but we still don't remember him as a hero. Eret is different, because unlike Dream he is doing everything in his power to crush himself down into the dark abyss he thinks he belongs in to atone for everything. He thinks he belongs with Wilbur and Schlatt, and he's making sure he gets put there. Villains simply don't care what people think of them, but Eret does. He's bowing to what he thinks everyone thinks of him and it's hurting him. I wish it didn't. He is not a monster. He's a good king, a good mentor, a good person, and he's my friend. He's not a villain. He deserves better, and I don't know what to do to make him realize that.

Technoblade will never be forgotten, no matter how many generations come and go and memories fade. The museum is strong, and it will hold for

centuries. Everything inside will remain there until the end of the Universe. Techno will always be right there, in stone, in writing, in songs and stories. Even if people avidly try to forget him, they won't be able to. He came to the SMP and he left again, but his tracks will never be covered. They're set in bedrock. Technoblade will never die.

Niki needs to be listened to. I know we never did it enough. Perhaps she didn't speak much, at first, and we all took that as a sign she didn't have much to say—and when she did, we brushed it off too easily. She spoke little before, what could she have to say now? We didn't listen enough. We didn't even realize we were overlooking her. Niki is one of the bravest and most noble warriors I have ever met. She lived through L'Manberg, stood up to Schlatt's dictatorship, fought in all the wars, stuck to her guns when no one else would follow her, joined the Syndicate, was crucial in destroying the Egg, ran head first into the Great Battle... and that's only a few. I'm missing some, I know I am, and it's not because I can't remember. Niki's achievements are far beyond my writing capacity, and I would need gallons of ink to tell them as they deserve to be told, in all their glory. She should run a nation, lead an endless army, become a legend worthy of Technoblade's own. Just because she decided not to be doesn't and shouldn't erase all that she is and has done. Just because she's sweet, and kind, and chose to become a baker doesn't mean we should treat her as far less than she is. No matter how long peace is here to stay, the people of the realms just don't seem to change; without a sword and a bloodthirsty temper, you are nothing in their esteem. That's not how it should be. We need to change. Niki deserves to be listened to, and so much more.

They say heroes never get happy endings, and from what I've seen that's unfortunately true. I want Niki to be the first to have one.

Note: find out more about the moss monster thing? plant? void? whatever it is? Brainstorm session needed, even if Badlands order not to trespass.

I'm not bad. I'm not a bad father of a bad friend, just like Tubbo said, but I'm just not good. Good enough to feel alright about myself, that is. I need to try harder, all the time, with everything. I'm not bad, and I can be good. I can be better. I can become someone who knows what to do, when to do it and how. Others managed, so why can't I? What's stopping me, apart from a funky mind?

...

Probably something else. I don't know what.

...

Tubbo's right, maybe I should get to bed.

Goodnight.

Oh, and P.S.: Sapnap's stag night. Never been to one. Slightly scared. Get a move on with finding a wedding present. Read up on hangover cures. Bring a redstone fire extinguisher. Things are going to get wild.

Chapter Fifteen: And Everything Is Worse Now

"What are you, really?"

The moss didn't answer.

Niki was not supposed to be there, in the Badlands, least of all in the forest where the monster swallowed up the floor. Antfrost had made the order abundantly clear, and Sapnap and Ranboo had both elected to obey it to the letter.

According to them, their futile treasure hunt for answers about the new growth was finished, at least for now.

We might pick it up later, when it's all died down, Sapnap had said, shrugging.

By the time it's "died down", it might be too late, she had replied. Her words had fallen on deaf ears.

Maybe her fellow Syndicate members had given up, but she certainly hadn't. She had gone right back to the Badlands the next day.

The moss didn't say anything. Niki didn't expect it to. That still wouldn't stop her from trying. She shifted on her heels and leaned in closer.

"Listen, I know you're alive. All plants, no matter how silent, are alive. I know you can hear me."

It didn't give any indication that it had.

"I don't mind you existing here. You're honestly quite pretty, like a night sky. If all moss and earth glittered like you, we'd always be walking on starlight. Who knows, maybe it would change the way we are, the way we think. If the

heavens were closer, maybe we'd all be better in every way. I want that. But I just want to know *what* you are, and *why* you're here. I don't know if you're dangerous, I don't know if I'm overreacting, or if I'm completely in the right. Please, I just need an answer."

Nothing.

"We've had another demonic growth problem before, and we'll fight to avoid another one. I will fight. I will do anything to keep peace in the SMP. Any other incident might very well kill what we have now. We fought so hard for it all. I don't want any trouble."

Neither did the moss, or maybe it did. Its refusal to move at all was hard to read.

Niki leaned in closer, and hissed; "I'm not supposed to be here. I'm only here because of you, so gods—I need an answer. Any answer!"

She briefly wondered if she should draw blood again. It wouldn't be an animal's—she wouldn't bear to senselessly murder a poor innocent soul—so it would have to be hers. Her palm stung at the very thought, but her pocket knife was already out and flipped open, ready and standing to attention. The edge of the silver blade glowed a sharp white in the sparse rays of sun that quivered through the thick foliage of the forest canopy. She unwound her bandage, still staring down the moss.

It didn't try to stop her.

She held her blade to her wound. It throbbed under the pressure.

Do it, the moss seemed to be encouraging her, as quiet and dead as it seemed to the outside eye.

She pressed the knife in deeper. She prepared to pull. Her finger slipped and slid around the handle. She gripped it tighter. She closed her eyes.

Wilbur used to do the same thing. When the stress piled up and he'd disappear for a while, Niki would find him beside the L'Manberg river, cleaning his palm off in the shallows.

It's better than the wrists, he told her the first time she had followed him and gasped at the sight. *At least you know you're not going to bleed to death.*

Despite her probing questions, he had given her no more details or reasonings. He only asked her not to tell his troops, a request she had granted against her better judgment. She suggested he should throw stones

in the river, draw on his skin instead of cutting it, just anything he could use to relieve himself without pulling out a blade. He refused, and again gave no more reasoning as to why.

Wilbur kept cutting his palm, and she kept finding him by the river. She'd wash and tend to his wounds, and he'd thank her for it. Sometimes, they'd talk. She'd bring him a cookie or two. He'd smile and laugh, call her his best friend with a chiming laugh, and it definitely didn't sound like a tease. When victory against the Greater SMP was drawing closer, he took to bringing along his guitar. Although he'd be too sore to play, he took it upon himself to teach her.

She was terrible, as were his attempted instructions. He was definitely more suited to teaching an army rather than a beginner musician. She'd rib him for that, and in turn he'd go on convoluted, dramatic rants about how her musical ability could probably force the big bad Dream into submission. Neither of them took any of the jabs to heart.

They were best friends, after all, and their little, secret meetings remained that way for a long time. At the end of the day, his slit palms were almost all but forgotten.

Until they weren't.

The only way everyone else found out was during the Pogtopia days. In the underground ravine that had become the revolutionaries' home, the rules were strict and life was hard. Between the constant fear of being sniffed out by President Schlatt's scouts and barely having enough food to make it through a week of forced seclusion, everyone was prone to going mad.

Tubbo and Tommy took their anger out on a makeshift training dummy. Others did so by throwing card games or screaming into the rocky abyss. Wilbur did it by constant scrutiny, threats to his soldiers, and above all cold, maniacal guilt-tripping.

When something didn't go the way he wanted it to, from the failed attack at the Red Festival to someone accidentally walking on his foot, he'd shove the assumed culprit against the wall, almost knocking them out cold. He wouldn't scream or shout as others were. He'd lean in close and whisper calmly into their ears, but his words would leave haunting marks. Then, he'd hold his palm up to their eyes, take the nearest sharp object, and force his victim to watch as he'd slit his own hand open. He'd cry out loudly, sometimes he'd even shed streams of tears to complete his farce. He'd sob that they were the reason he was under so much pressure, the reason he snapped, that the blood and the blade was his only relief.

Niki still bound his cuts afterwards, although she did so with a lot more gritted teeth and glares of contempt. She herself was never subjected to incidents—Wilbur probably realized that she'd never care for him again if he did—but she knew others were.

It wasn't difficult to notice who; they were the pale faced fighters who decidedly started spending far more time huddled silently in corners than they did anything else. She was also certain that Tommy had gone through the ordeal, although the boy had always been so loud and fierce that it was hard to tell if he was trying to cover up anything.

In hindsight, he probably was.

Perhaps those slit palms were the thing that had marked Niki more than anything else Wilbur had done.

When Philza carried his body through the scorched remains of L'Manberg on November 16th, everyone gasped and gagged at the bleeding hole in his chest. Niki herself couldn't stomach the sight of his hands. The blood on them was not from the battle, and was not from his father's sword. He had likely torn them apart in the secluded silence of the button room, his last attempt at saving himself.

It didn't work. It never had.

Niki couldn't do it to herself.

She dropped her knife. Her stomach churned, and she doubled over. Her forehead pressed against the floor, mere inches from the moss' ragged border. She shivered at the thought that one accidental scratch could have it drown her and choke her insides.

"Fine, you win," she muttered, small plant chutes tickling her cheeks. "If you're not going to say anything, then I will: I want you to leave us all alone. Grow and live however you wish, but do it away from us. Please. Please..."

She sank lower to the ground until she was almost kissing it. Her hands came up to cover her ears until all she could hear were her own thoughts. She was ready to pray to it if she had to, although that would lean too much towards the Egg's past cultist movement for anyone's liking. She would take the whole burden upon herself if she had to. She was ready. She was ready to do something that mattered again, something other than stirring batter and wrangling piping bags for all they had to offer. She would have been lying if she said she hadn't been waiting for a chance to do so for ages now.

A hand landed on her shoulder.

Niki sprang to her feet, a knife out and thrust in front of her. Her wrist was caught and immobilized. Slight points of pressure were gently pressed by clawed fingers. She lost her grip. The knife landed blade down in the ground.

"Niki?" The surprised, albeit still friendly voice, was familiar to her, although she had rarely ever spoken with it face to face.

She relaxed only a little.

Bad dropped his grip on her, his pale eyes narrowed. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"I didn't expect to see you here either," she confessed. If she had, she would have probably been far sneakier.

"Didn't you get the order?"

"What order?"

"The Badlands are temporarily on restricted lockdown. No one comes onto our land without explicit permission."

"Oh no, she's definitely aware." A tan shadow slunk out from behind Bad, tail swinging angrily. "I caught her, Sapnap and Ranboo yesterday. I thought it was an honest show of ignorance."

"It was," Niki was quick to confirm.

"That's more than we can say right now."

She said nothing. She still held her head high.

"Do you have anything to do with this?" Bad gestured to the moss.

"No."

"Then why are you so obsessed with it?"

"I'm not the one locking down my nation."

"That's our job. We're looking after our people and the others of the SMP. You on the other hand are purposely breaking our laws to, what, just take a quick look at it?"

"I'm not here for it," she lied.

"Oh, really?"

Bad crossed his arms. Niki had never seen either of them like this before, so cold and serious, dare she even say furious. This was nothing like their Egg infection. Right now, today, they were themselves. It only made it all that much harder to take in.

The SMP had started feeling less like a collection of once-warring nations in recent years, and more like a lovely, tight-knit community. Leaders walked, worked and spoke among each other's people, borders felt more like fancy lines on maps than real things worth respecting. In this extended time of peace, Niki had all but forgotten about the notions of rank and authority.

A small, passing thought that skipped through her mind wondered if Technoblade would have been proud of her for doing so.

The Badlands' leaders were far more than friends and friendly acquaintances. They had power that Niki did not and for the first time in ages, they were using it. It took her far more aback than it should have.

"Yes, really." She refused to back down. "I was just curious to see what it was, that's all."

"Curiosity kills people, especially when it's done in an off-limits zone. There's a reason we're taking extra precautions. We know how these kinds of things go."

"Because the way you handled the Egg was brilliant and effective."

Her sarcastic tone of voice received a cold response. Bad and Antfrost's eyes blazed, so much so she almost expected them to turn back to a bloody crimson.

"Exactly," the demon hissed, "that's why this time, we're cracking down and not taking any risks."

You're one of them, his undertone spat in her face.

She crossed her arms. "Did it never occur to you that I can be of use?" she asked them. "I can help you deal with this."

"Absolutely not."

"Why?"

"We're not dragging civilians into this, not again."

Civilians?

"I fought against the Egg and Dream, and Schlatt's tyranny," she replied sharply. "I'm a warrior, I'm just as capable as anyone else."

"Peace has softened us all, and most have moved on from blades. You're one of them."

She was fuming. "How dare y—"

"No, Niki, how dare *you* directly disobey our orders!"

Bad squared up to her and it was only then she realized that he was bigger than her. A lot bigger. She still, foolishly, did not back down. She put her face right up to his.

"Remember who *actually* took down the Egg," she reminded him. "I can assure you that fire is ready to blaze again if it has to."

"Thanks for the offer. Now get out of my sight." Before he turned, he grabbed her wrist tightly. A warning. "Don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong, and don't go messing with things that aren't your concern, like the sculk."

She furrowed her brow. "Sculk?"

His fingers dug even deeper. "What did I just say?"

"You know what it is."

"Research has its benefits," Antfrost admitted. Unlike Bad, his tone had changed from fury into something softer, something more subdued. "It's not a native growth to the SMP, and the spores were carried onto our shores by the storm. There, happy?"

In part. At least she had a name for the moss. Maybe her trip wasn't such a waste after all. However, was it truly worth the trouble the confrontation brought along?

"We will be reporting this incident to King Eret," Bad told her.

"King Eret? Why him?"

"You're living on his land, therefore he is your monarch."

"I have no ruler."

"Strictly speaking, you live and work on his land, so you do. We have to report this to him."

"Since when have you both been such sticklers for rules?"

"Because we're doing what's right, to avoid a repeat of the Egg."

"Sam would have done things differently."

She immediately realized her mistake.

Bad's eyes stormed in a sudden show of hostility she had definitely not expected to see.

"You're right, he would have probably run off again." He let go of her wrist. The marks in her skin were deep and needle-thin, but still hurt abundantly. "Now, we would appreciate it if you stopped comparing our hard work to that of a deserter."

Niki stepped back.

They couldn't hate Sam. They were best friends, they couldn't hate him. Even when he left, their parting was one made with smiles and friendly whispers of good fortune to fill the sails of Puffy's ship.

The way their present remarks were made, with bite but a wobbly toned foundation nonetheless, told her that it was all so much more complicated than a simple matter of love or hate.

"Is that understood?"

She looked to an invisible point somewhere behind them both. With some difficulty, she pushed out a feeble; "Yes."

There was no reply of "thank you for understanding", or even a sharp "good" to end their interaction—and of course, there was no apology from either of them.

Bad turned around without a second look. He went to the sculk, crouched down and jotted something down in a notepad. He then left through the bushes.

Only Niki and Antfrost were left. She couldn't even look at him.

Ant was the last to leave. His stare was not one of anger. "Did you even think to warn Velvet?"

Niki's mouth was locked firmly shut, and she hung her head.

"If you didn't care about yourself, that's fine, but you could have at least warned... I don't know what could have happened if..."

He tried, and failed, to finish his sentences. When he couldn't, he sighed and momentarily closed his eyes.

"He's my whole world, Niki, and I can't let anything happen to him. Maybe you don't understand, but—"

"I do."

She knew what it was like to have her everything crumble before her. From L'Manberg's fall to shooting Wilbur with her own two hands, she knew all too well.

"Then why didn't you warn him?"

She couldn't answer him.

"Niki?"

"Ant, come on. She has two legs, she can find her way home without us."

The cat's ears cocked towards the sound of Bad's voice. He said nothing. His face fell even more, disappointment overshadowing any anger that he and his companion shared towards her. He left too, and Niki was alone.

For the first time, she hated it. Shaking legs and wobbling knees dragged her towards a tree. She collapsed against the rough bark of the trunk and sank to the ground. It was an uncomfortable position, with the roots threatening to tear through the skin of her back and wrap around her spine. She was certain that if given the chance, they'd even drag her down into the earth. She was more than ready to let them right about now.

Down, down, past the dead and the earthworms, without a glance for the Underworld, the Elysian Fields or Tartarus, crashing through the bedrock crust and disappearing into the void beyond. No one had ever been so far before. Some didn't believe that anything existed beyond the six foot holes of graves or deep and winding caverns. Niki would be the first to know, and she most likely wouldn't come back to tell the tale.

It was an easy way out of it all, an easy thing to wish and fantasize about. Her stomach churned.

Bad was right. Peace had softened her, softened them all, and she hated it.

"Niki?"

She took no notice of the call of her name.

"Niki!"

She closed her eyes, pretending to not hear the cry.

Even as it came closer.

Even as Hannah fluttered down by her side.

"Niki, oh my gods! Are you dead?"

That made her open an eye.

"Not that I'm aware of."

Hannah clapped a relieved hand on her chest. Her roses sighed with her.

"Good, I was worried. What are you doing here?"

Niki shrugged.

"I saw Bad and Antfrost walking out of the forest. I followed them, and they were talking about you."

"About how I trespassed, I'm assuming."

"No, they were worried about you."

Worried?

"Especially Antfrost. He said that Velvet told him where you might be, and they—Niki?"

She didn't realize she had started crying until she touched her damp cheeks. She sniffled and cleared her throat.

"I'm fine, it's nothing."

She wanted to be alone, and yet her tongue tied every time she tried to say so. Hannah, most likely, couldn't read minds. She had also made it abundantly clear that she couldn't read rooms all too well either.

The fairy sat down beside her, her back to the same tree, spine and wings uncomfortably being dug into by the bumps and roots. She was so very close to her now, and the strong fragrance of her flowers took precedence over every other sensation. It was suffocating. It was... nice.

"What are you doing?" Niki asked.

"I'm just trying to copy you." Hannah crossed her arms over her chest exactly like Niki did. "If I'm in your shoes, maybe I can understand you, and maybe I can help."

Nothing Hannah had ever said ever made Niki smile, truly and genuinely grin. Even if it was small, barely enough to lighten her mood, it was something. It was something she didn't deserve.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you trying to help me?"

Hannah shrugged. "You're hurting. I don't like seeing people in pain."

"But I was nothing but mean to you, surely—"

"Exactly. Everyone knows you're not mean, you're just hurting. No one should do that alone."

First Sapnap, now Hannah. There must have been something, then. Niki couldn't see it, whatever it was. It was frustrating.

"I don't know how to do this."

"Talking might help."

"It's not easy to just talk about it. It's not that simple, and I don't know if I can do it."

"You'll never know if you don't try."

She looked over at Hannah. The fairy was gazing back with her sparkling, emerald eyes, so pure and clear, so utterly untouched by grief or sadness. She didn't know how that was possible. Niki knew what her own looked like. She had been forced to see them time and time again. Their pale blue hue had darkened over time until it was the same colour as a bleak sky after a storm, or the dead grey dryness of dying coral. Hers were blemished,

Hannah's were not. One pair had aged with History's turmoil and the other had retained their beautiful innocence.

"It's worth a shot, Niki."

Niki turned her gaze back to the covered, leafy sky. The sun dappled her with spots of light. The roots were hard and oddly shaped, but the grass and earth were green and warm.

She took a deep breath. "It's worth a try," she gingerly agreed.

It took her another moment or two to finally get herself to start. She wondered if she should perhaps take the time to prepare something, organize it properly, and make sure she was heard. She soon realized that it would be fruitless.

As her words unravelled, so did everything she had been locking up deep inside her, some of which surprised even herself.

"Most days, I don't recognize myself. As Time drags on, everything has changed. Nothing feels familiar anymore. Even my own bakery, my apron, my patrons, everything just feels off, like something's missing. It's like *I'm* missing. I'm not me anymore. Now when I look in the mirror, I don't see a warrior; I see someone who doesn't know what she is anymore."

As the realization dawned on her, she felt her chest heave, then lighten.

"I want the girl I was so long ago—the one who fought properly. The one who tried her hardest, who loved and smiled despite everything. The one who fought for what was right and would never back down, least of all in the face of proclamations and rules. Now everything seems to have just faded into thin air, taking me with it. I don't know what I am. I'm not a warrior, I'm not a baker, I'm not the woman I once was. I don't know what I'm doing or what I'm trying to be. I need to stop."

"You shouldn't give up," Hannah replied. "Maybe you're lost now, but you'll find yourself again one day."

Oh, how Niki wished she could think as simply and optimistically as that again.

"There are holes. They're everywhere, and I can't seem to be able to fill them no matter how hard I try. I didn't even realize I was doing so until Sapnap pointed it out to me. I didn't see them until he spoke to me, and I realized I've been trying to stuff them like I'd stuff a pastry, without thinking. I was

treating it all like a common problem that didn't matter... but maybe they do. I miss them."

There.

There it was, the exact thorn in her heart. It was pulled out suddenly, and blood began to gush out.

She choked. "They're gone, all of them. I don't know what to do. First it was Wilbur, then Phil, and Techno, and Sam, and Puffy and—"

When Puffy's name came around, she broke once again. She threw her arm over her eyes, trying ever so desperately to slow the fall of her tears.

"Gods, part of me's still in love with her," she hiccuped, "and now she's not here anymore it's just become harder to accept and... She would know what to do about all this. I trust her more than I trust myself."

In fact, they all would know what to do, better than she did in any case. Hannah didn't interrupt, even as Niki rambled on. That pleasantly surprised her. The fairy, for one of the first times, was listening to her, hanging on to every word.

"I killed my best friend because he was trying to kill me, but I shouldn't have. I should have tried harder to make him see sense, to change him. To save him. I should have saved Wilbur instead of shooting him down like an animal. I should have tried harder with all of them. Maybe if I was quick or skilled enough, I would have saved Philza's life. He'd still be here, and Technoblade would have no reason to lock himself away and leave us. And Sam too: I was the one who pushed Puffy towards him, and when she left so did he. I broke up the Badlands and now they're calling him a deserter and a coward. He doesn't deserve it. I'm to blame, I tore everyone apart. It's my fault."

An admission of guilt that had been sugar-coated and expertly hidden, so well that even she hadn't realized that it was there in the first place. Everything made so much more sense now.

It was her fault. All of it had happened because of her and her mistakes.

Now she had to take accountability, no matter how much it hurt. She had three lives left to do so.

"None of this is your fault."

Hannah's sweet, gentle tone was like a demon's silver tongue to Niki then. She didn't want to hear it, all the seeds of doubt and temptation that it

planted in her ear. She didn't want to let anything bloom. She didn't want anyone painfully twisting her mind when it was already made up.

The blame was on her. Everything was her fault.

"The way you said it may seem like it is, but I know better. No one blames you for anything."

"What about L'Manberg? The L'Mantree? Have they just forgiven me for that?"

She heard the fairy shuffle awkwardly. "No, that, I don't think they have—"

"There." Niki crossed her arms, certain she had made her point stick.

"—but I think they understand why you did what you did. I think everyone's trying to move past that era."

Her stomach knotted as Hannah went on.

"But the rest is none of your doing. You didn't kill Philza, a stray arrow did. There's nothing that could have stopped it."

"And what if there was?"

"Then it was not yours to stop it."

"And Technoblade?"

"I didn't even know he left in the first place. It can't have been because of you."

"You don't know that."

"I don't," she agreed. "But you're a wonderful person, Niki. I doubt you were the reason."

Wonderful.

Had she just heard that correctly?

A wonderful person.

A compliment straight out of someone she had been nothing but hostile to in their short acquaintanceship.

"I often wish I was like you," Hannah confessed in a whisper. "I wish I had fought enough to finally be able to settle down and be proud of it all."

"But I'm not..."

"You should be. Everything you've accomplished is amazing."

"I know I should, but I can't. I can't let myself do it alone. I didn't fight those battles alone, I had friends beside me and now most of them are gone. Celebrating any of it without them feels wrong."

"Have you *tried*?"

She hadn't. "I don't think I want to."

"That shouldn't stop you from being happy. You of all people deserve to have good lives. And as for Puffy... I wish I could say something, but I've never been in love before. I'm sorry."

Niki had expected that answer. In hindsight, she wondered if it had been worth bringing it up at all.

"It's fine. It'll fade eventually."

She had no way to know for sure, and even if it did quieten down, past letters and fleeting memories would beg to differ.

"I told her I just wanted us to be friends, and I didn't regret our bond," she said. The imprint of their conversation the eve of the Red Banquet was still impossibly vivid in her mind. "And that was true, I didn't. I said I loved her just as strongly as I had before, but as a friend rather than a partner. I wish I knew the difference back then. I realized far too late. Now I can't do anything about it. She's gone, she's with someone else, and she has a new life. I'm happy for her, but that doesn't change the fact that she's gone. She's gone, and everything is worse now."

The one soul who probably could have understood her inside out was oceans away, and everything since had been worse. She just hadn't realized it until now.

If Niki was any younger, a child of cheerful age with more fantasies running around in her mind than harsh truths, she would have even believed that the skulk had come because of that.

With so many people she had loved gone, the SMP had started to rot and decay around her. Her grief was the root of the problem, and that's why she was so adamant on trying to fix it.

Maybe.

That was nothing but an outlandish theory, at best.

"I want to go back in time," she said. "I want to bring back the past. I want to save people, I want to fight, I want to do something worthwhile again."

"Is that why you're so interested in the moss?"

"Yes. Yes, it is."

Hannah pondered for a while, basking them in a tense silence that made Niki shiver.

"Like the arrow that killed Phil, it's not yours to stop," the fairy eventually said. "You can't be everyone's hero."

Niki was about to interrupt, but in true Hannah fashion, the fairy went on.

"And for what it's worth, I think your bakery is more important than you think. Working there showed me a good side of the SMP we never used to see much of. They're all smiling, cheerful, spending money on things other than weapons and healing herbs, and taking a moment to sit and relax. People seem happier every day, and they're all carrying bags of your pastries. You and Velvet are helping the SMP heal, one cookie at a time. You don't have to spill blood to be worthy of anything."

"But the sculk—"

"The Badlands are on it, or so it seems. Let them do some of the heavy lifting, alright? They need to stay in shape."

That made her laugh, even though it definitely shouldn't have. She clapped her hand to her mouth, stifling her giggle. Hannah didn't bother. She made a whole scene about it, throwing her head back and letting her laugh ring through every flower in the forest. They bloomed in her wake, some even around Niki's own feet. Roses crawled out of the earth and weaved themselves together, creating an ankle high wall that separated Niki from the moss, and both of them from the world. It was small, but it was enough.

Niki managed to regain her composure, but only just.

Hannah was still laughing at the top of her voice, writhing with gasps even long after her joke lost its weight. It was young and carefree, the way she found her own comments the funniest thing in the world, and Niki realized just how endearing that was.

She realized a few things, in fact.

One of them was she didn't know how she ever could have disliked Hannah at first glance. Even when she had stolen her sugar, she had been smiling sweetly. She had been more excited about showing Niki what she found than worried about being accused of theft. When she had been hired at the bakery, she had thrown herself wholeheartedly into the job and treated each failed pastry as a treasure in its own right. That had often made some things difficult, but they weren't as drastically evil as Niki had often made them out to be.

Not to mention, Hannah had come looking for her when no one else had.

Looking at her now, wiping small, joyful tears from her eyes, Niki didn't see a liability or an obnoxious criminal.

She saw a friend.

The fairy turned to look at her. She tilted her head curiously. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Although her breathing had returned to normal, everything about her was still roaring with laughter, from the bright spark in her eyes to her toothy smile, the fluttering tips of her wings to the cheerful rustle of the flowers wound around her arm.

Niki was still smiling. She shrugged. "I just want to thank you," she said. "Thank you for putting up with me, despite everything."

"Of course, that's what friends do."

That was the moment she knew the feeling was mutual, and she had been forgiven. The remaining weight on her chest ebbed away.

"Velvet said he'd teach me how to make some doughnuts today," the fairy told her, changing the subject abruptly. "Wanna come?"

No offer had ever been more welcome in her lives. "Absolutely, and maybe you could teach us how to add flower flavours."

Hannah waved a freshly picked bouquet under her nose. "Already well ahead of you!" She beamed.

Hannah was still a relative handful. She was jumpy, naive, impulsive, didn't know how to listen to proper instructions and talked more than anyone Niki had ever met—and considering her days spent in L'Manberg beside Tommy, that was saying something—but none of that mattered much anymore.

They were friends and whether Hannah realized it or not, she was Niki's saving grace. One talk had revealed so much, and like the rest of the SMP, Niki had found it easier to breathe, and easier to try and look towards the future.

Puffy was gone, and everything was worse now. But maybe, just maybe, Hannah could make it all a little better.

Chapter Sixteen: Like The River Flows

The piglin stumbled across a forest river.

It was a proper one too, not a measly little brook or stream that was made up of more smooth, damp rocks than rushing water. The last river worthy of that name he had encountered was a gushing mouth spewing out into a narrow estuary. Stupidly, he had elected to travel in the opposite direction and had started to scoop up water from wherever he could. His throat was clogged by week-old remnants of muddy rainwater and sour limestone drops taken from shallow cavern pools and dripping stalactites.

He didn't believe in much anymore, least of all in miracles, but this was one of the exceptions.

He set down his pack and crouched down by the water's edge. He drank abundantly, snout shoved under the current and his breath blowing bubbles. He washed out his canteen and filled it up. He finished it in only a couple of gulps. He filled it up again.

He would have packed up and set off again, but something stopped him. He paused, ears twitching to the sound of the gentle current. It guzzled and sloshed around. The shallows beckoned to him.

Heaving his pack back off his shoulder, he took out a few personal effects and cleaned them.

Then, he washed his clothes.

Finally, he washed himself.

He wore nothing but his emerald pendant on a silver chain. The river was cold, filled with thawed snow from the faraway mountaintops. Icy blasts dashed through his fur, tearing up the skin underneath and ridding him of weeks worth of stubborn grime. Pus-filled wounds were cleaned of dirt and remaining infection. Muscle pains he had been too numb to notice before were softly soothed.

It was an unfamiliar feeling, but it was... not horrible. Nicer than he ever remembered it being.

He even closed his eyes. He could maybe even sleep properly now...

'It was about time you took a bath.'

The piglin sighed. "You really took "every step of the way" literally, didn't you?"

'Obviously. I keep my word.'

He sank deeper into the water. "Is privacy not a thing anymore?"

'I could look away if you'd like.'

"I think we're far past that point."

'Fair enough. How does it feel?'

"How does what feel?"

'The water.'

The piglin shrugged. "Like water, what else?"

'Techno.' The tone was teasing, but only just. It seemed to be bordering a lot more on a gentle scold, like how a teacher would discipline a pupil. *'That's not what I meant.'*

He could have been snarky and impertinent, tut back at the voice in his mind, and desperately try to persuade himself it was all still just nothing but a hallucination. There was still a fleeting hope that he could make all of this go away and live out the rest of his life the way he had hit the road: alone, lost, poor and mangy.

He wasn't like that, no matter how much he tried to pretend he was. He eventually answered.

"It's better than I remember it being," he said. "It's not as warm as the geysers were, and not as cold as the arctic ocean. It's nothing like it what it was in the tundra."

'Might be because we're not there anymore.'

"Obviously."

'Obviously.'

Neither of them said anything for a long time. Surprising himself, the piglin was the one who broke it.

"I can't remember the last time I actually washed in running water like this. I honestly don't think I ever have. It's always been in pools or lakes or bathtubs. The water in those is unmoving, stoic, quiet. Streams and rivers are different. The water just feels so... *alive*."

Ironical, considering he was talking to a dead man.

"The strong current never stops rushing. So... yeah."

He faltered. His train of thought was carried away by the waters. The avian's voice seemed to notice.

'Are you trying to make a point?'

"No, I'm not. Rushing water is just rushing water and I'm not used to it."

He jumped as a slippery school of silver fish darted between his legs.

A chuckle. *'I can tell. I have a point to make, if you let me.'*

"Do I have a choice?" the piglin grunted. He had put a lot more bite into his tease than he originally intended to.

Another laugh. *'Absolutely not. Do you know how I could tell you weren't used to the current?'*

"Because you know me like the back of your hand and realize I don't like swimming?"

'Nice try but no. Watch it. Watch the river run.'

The river continued both ways, straight for the most part. One end turned off sharply and disappeared into the woods. The other, also unable to stay orderly for long, twisted and wound towards the moor. The piglin was standing in the middle of it, trotters rooted into the sandy and pebbled riverbed below. He took time to gaze down each length.

'See how, no matter what gets in its way, it keeps rushing? It swallows jutting rocks, pushes past hanging willow branches and even tears through the earth if it has to. No matter which obstacles are thrown its way, no matter how difficult they may seem to overcome, it finds a way to keep flowing. It moves on.'

Something heaved in his chest.

'I want you to be like a river.'

The piglin immediately got out of the water. He dried off and got dressed without a word.

'I'm being serious.'

He didn't acknowledge his words.

'Today of all days, I need you to listen to me. You are hurting yourself needlessly and you need to stop.'

He tightened the buckles on his pack and threw it roughly over his shoulder.

'You need to learn to forgive yourself and that you're worthy of healing. You don't deserve this burden you're carrying around.'

"I have been carrying burdens since I drew my first blood, and they will stay with me until I die."

'Are you sure about that?'

"What?"

'Listen.'

He did. He shrugged. "Nothing."

'Exactly, mate; nothing.'

It took the piglin a good while to realize what it was that Philza meant. It took him even longer than that to let it sink in, but only a second to let out a shocked breath.

Everything was silent. *Silent.*

There was barely a breath.

And there wasn't a single voice.

No voices.

"What's going on?"

'They're gone, mate.'

"Gone? Gone where?"

'Only the gods know.'

But more importantly than where, *why* were they gone?

He held a hand to his forehead. His mind had never felt so empty before, so tranquil. It was vaulted, empty, echoing with his *own* opinions, his *own* memories. No one else's. It was so new, and so utterly terrifying too. They were gone, and although he often complained about them—and with good reason—he didn't like it.

His entire world was crumbling even more.

"What's happening, what have you done?"

'/—'

"What *are* you, really? What are you doing to me?"

'Techno—'

"Don't call me that, don't you *dare* call me that!"

His pack escaped his hands. His sword clattered to the floor with it. His roar shook the entire world to its core. His silence hushed it with him. He had everything in his grasp.

Everything.

Almost everything.

Everything except himself.

'That's your name.'

"Not anymore."

He didn't know what his name was. He didn't know who he was anymore. He was nothing.

Not without his home.

Not without the screaming voices demanding blood.

Not without a series of impressive deeds to his name, or a reputation inked in blood.

Not without Phil.

Everything that made him what he once was was gone. He was nothing.

'The only thing that defines you is yourself.'

"You're a part of me." His throat tightened. "You always have been."

His empty arms wrapped around himself and squeezed tightly. He had never wanted a hug more than he did then. He wanted hands and feathers to soothe and comfort him, to reassure him about everything and anything he was worried about.

The past few years had been empty ones, and he was alone. Alone in the tundra, alone on the road, alone in his grief.

Grief.

It was a word he hadn't dared even think about, despite being stuck inside it. He hadn't realized how deep in he was until now.

He was standing in the middle of an endless lake, feet stuck and chest deep in dark, clouded liquid. The water was thick and stagnant, trapping him in silence. He couldn't move, and he couldn't reach out for anyone. He was left alone to die.

He had put himself there.

His tragedy was of his own making.

'It doesn't have to be.'

The piglin's thick nails dug into his arms. Everything hurt, inside and out. The lake was dragging him down into its depths. He was slipping more and more. He still couldn't reach. There was no one there.

The stillness of the surface was disturbed. It rippled and waved, as if a heavy rain had suddenly poured down from the storm clouds hanging mere feet above his head in stone-cold suspension.

They weren't raindrops.

They were tears.

The piglin dropped down to the floor, the rough dirt and pebbled floor tearing at his knees. His grip tightened until he was numbed again. His forehead pressed against the earth, and everything he had been holding inside him bled out. Bitter cold became even more bitter warmth.

He was back on the smoking battlefield, holding his best friend's dead body. He was stroking his wings and his hair praying to the gods above that they would be merciful and bring Philza back to him.

He wept the same tears now as he did then. That was the only thing that hadn't shifted.

"I should have saved you, Phil. I shouldn't have let you go off alone. I should have answered your call for help myself and I didn't and I..."

His chest tightened, begging him not to go on.

'Be the river. Let it flow.'

With shaking hands, the piglin opened his pack. He took out two ivory carved horns. One was pristine, unused. The other had a crow feather tied to it, and was smeared with bloodied fingerprints. He held them both tightly to his breast.

"I couldn't leave them, it's one of the only things I have left of you. I couldn't leave it behind... I'm sorry, Phil, I'm sorry..."

His sobs burned his snout, his eyes and his throat, turning them red and raw. Every breath was a dagger. His insides were torn clean apart. He felt sick.

The lake began to shift. A current appeared, and he found himself following it. There wasn't an end in sight. He doubted there would be, at least not any time soon.

But there was a current regardless.

'None of it was your fault, it was simply always meant to be.'

His cries only grew louder, but his shoulders lightened. His grip became less harsh.

'Oh, my brother... I wish I had the courage come sooner. Just let it all out. Go ahead.'

The current was strong. He was pulled under now and then, up and down and all around like a redstone roller coaster gone haywire, but in the end he always managed to suck in air. It tasted like ambrosia. As the stream continued to flow, rays of sunlight peeked through the clouds. Their stormy grey became one as light as a young dove's down.

The horns still weighed heavy in his hands.

He should have buried them with Philza.

The piglin dug a sizable hole by the river bank and lay them down, side by side. He covered them up, palms roughly flattening the mound. The mud splattered up onto his newly washed clothes and fur. He was back at the beginning, again.

It was over before he realized what he had just done. His hands were sticky. Dried tears clumped the fur on his cheeks. His heart was thumping madly.

His mind, however, was clear—clearer than it had ever been before. The only thing left inside it, if he was at all, was Philza's voice.

The piglin was certain at this point that the voice was very much real, and that it was very much his.

'There we go, Techno. There we go...'

Techno.

Technoblade.

He was still fighting for air, still too blinded by the sun to appreciate it, and still trudging through dark waters, but his name was finally starting to sound like his again.

Chapter Seventeen: The Strangers In The Forest

"Alright, I absolutely don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but there's something fishy going on. For the past week or so, there's been a small, two-person camp set up in the forest. We saw it on a patrol, and at first, we thought nothing of it. Lots of travellers use the forest on their journey, so why would we be suspicious, y'know?"

"George..."

"And then we kept patrolling, day after day, and they were still there. In fact, they had strung up washing lines and built a proper fire pit. They're really settling down for a while."

"George."

"I saw one of them up by the dragon, but he'd always be gone by the time I'd get there to question them. They don't seem to be social enough to come and say hello, but they're not exactly hiding either. I honestly think—"

"George!"

"What?"

"That's great," Sapnap huffed, stumbling forwards with a leaning tower of boxes in his arms, "but please, for the love of the gods, help me out here!"

"Right, sorry."

George snapped out of the world of obliviousness his lengthy report had dragged him into and rushed to help the fireborn.

Tubbo watched on, stifling a laugh, as the two of them struggled to halve the load between them. Their sharp orders to one another grew louder and louder, Sapnap's careless tongue quickly running through a string of insults as the tower threatened to topple.

Thankfully, George was a lot more competent than he was made out to be. Only one of the boxes tipped, but nothing managed to fall out entirely except for the short length of a single flower garland. The rest was held up with an astonishing show of dexterity.

Sapnap finally thanked him, noisily deflating as his tension noisily blew right out. "Next time, take a look before you start to ramble."

"Sorry, I just thought you should know."

"No, you're right, just try to read the room before you do."

"I was listening," Tubbo offered from the top of his stepladder.

"I'm not saying I *wasn't* listening, I'm saying it's hard to focus on two things at once," Sapnap corrected. He shifted the boxes in his arms. "Now I'm ready. Continue, George."

His friend simply shrugged. "There's nothing more to say. There are just suspicious travellers in the forest, that's all."

"That's all?"

"Yeah, and I wouldn't have said anything but my gut says something's wrong."

The two of them carried their boxes to a nearby trestle table. Tubbo jumped off from his perch and followed them out of curiosity, snatching a nearby table cloth as an excuse to join in. He rushed in front and laid it out just in time for the two men to dump their loads on top. Once the boxes were laid out, they began to sort their contents. The ram helped idly.

George held a garland for a little longer than he probably meant to. "It's like they're waiting for something," he said. "The question is, waiting for what?"

"The wedding?" Tubbo suggested. After all, it was the most obvious guess.

"I don't think so. If they were invited they would have come to see us, even if I know Sapnap has probably made some shady connections in his life—"

"Hey!"

"Am I wrong?"

The fireborn huffed out a warm breath. "Everyone we invited is here in the SMP," he said to them, "and I've seen all of the guests in the past few days. I'd know if there are any camping out in my own backyard."

"That's even more of a reason to worry," George continued. "We don't know who they are. They could be dangerous."

"Well, whoever they are, they haven't shown themselves to be a threat," Sapnap pointed out, firmly placing a pile of napkins down to drive in his words. "If we go around aggressively questioning and policing every traveller that walks through our realm, I can tell you we'd make far more enemies than we would make friends."

"But—"

"George, please. The best day of my life is tomorrow, and I'd just like one more afternoon of peace before it, alright?"

George softened and reluctantly nodded. "Alright, fine. I'm sorry—"

Sapnap cut him off. "Oh no, I don't want any apologies either," he scolded, wagging a finger in his face. "We're saving that for tonight while we're completely wasted and crying our darkest secrets out."

That made George smile again. "Yeah, that checks out."

"You better look after yourselves," Tubbo told them. "Deciding to do your stag party the day before your ceremony is a recipe for disaster."

"That's why we got the alchemists to cook up some hangover potions. Come on, Tubbo, are you sure you don't want to come?"

The ram had received his own invitation that very day. He still declined. "Someone's got to look after Michael," he reminded them. "Wait until you and Karl have kids one day, then you'll understand."

"I'm sure I will."

At the mention of a family—or rather, a loving future in general—Sapnap grinned from ear to ear. His excitement was bubbling over the edge, hot lava just waiting to explode.

"I didn't get to properly thank you for coming to help out," the fireborn said.

"It's nothing, really."

In all honesty, Snowchester was a very quiet place nowadays. He had far more free time than he knew what to do with it and found himself trying to fill his days however he could—and if it happened to help a friend or two out as well, that was always an added bonus. Helping set up the grand Kinoko wedding was just one of the many random tasks he had taken upon himself.

"Well, you've been a big help nevertheless. Hey, Niki!" Sapnap waved to an approaching figure.

"Hey, Sap," she greeted back, unloading a basketful of pastries beside Tubbo. The mouth-watering steam from the treats inside still somehow managed to seep through the covered lid.

"Smells delicious—*hey!*"

Niki swatted the fireborn's hand away as it dove underneath the cloth. "Those are for tonight. The others are over there."

When they both turned their attention to Velvet and Hannah, Tubbo nevertheless managed to snag a cookie and devour it before anyone noticed.

Velvet, platter in hand, held up his own array of nibbles. "Free samples, courtesy of us," he announced, offering them to the fireborn. "Just in case you want to change your order before tomorrow."

Sapnap's gloved fingers greedily reached to grab them, but stopped part way there. He drew back.

"Karl should be the one to taste-test," he decided, gesturing towards the wide open doors of the library. "His taste buds are finer than any of ours. That's why I love him."

"Aw!" Hannah clapped her hands together. "That's so cute!"

Niki made a face. "Hannah, that's probably one of the weirdest compliments I've ever heard, don't take any notes."

Tubbo had to agree, but only in part. The deep affection in Sapnap's eyes made the clumsy words coming out of his mouth sound like the rawest and most beautiful of truths.

The flower fairy fluttered over to the fireborn and lay a lush crown of orchids, carnations and chrysanthemums around his head. When she pulled back, her smile was somehow wider than the groom-to-be's own.

"This is so exciting!" she giggled, openly delighted when Sapnap thanked her. "I've never been to such a big wedding." She thought for a moment. "I actually don't think I've ever been to a wedding before. It's not something fae tend to do or take part in."

"Well, there's a first for everything," Tubbo said. Once he had everyone's attention, he beckoned them all towards the stone dojo, where Ranboo had given him a thumbs up. "Including your first proper view of your venue."

The ram led their small little group towards the center of Kinoko Kingdom, where all the roads joined at a large square plaza. Back in Dream's era, it had been a market-place-turned-training-ground, just in time for the final battle. Ever since, it had been known as the "dojo", although blades and martial arts were rarely practiced there any more. Today, it had been cleared and polished, dressed with rows and rows of chairs draped with silk and flowers. The center aisle was left empty, save for a wooden bridge temporarily built over the large circular pool in the middle. The red yin and yang motif in the depths shone with a ruby glare when the sun hit the surface, speckled with shadowed spots as lily pads and petals glided across the water. At the end of the path stood an archway of woven cherry blossom branches.

The whole thing had been carefully calculated and executed by Tubbo and his companions. Everyone, from Ranboo to the bakers and their flower fairy friend, had a hand in it in one way or another. Tubbo himself carefully drew the blueprints for the whole set up.

When they offered to take on the task and asked the happy couple for their own vision of it, both had answered in the exact same way: "Surprise us."

From the way their friend's face lit up, they all knew they had done their job right.

Sapnap froze the moment he saw the scene, widened eyes only matched by the sheer size of his jaw drop of amazement. "My gods, this is—"

"Too big?"

"Too boring?"

"Too classic?"

"Perfect," he finished for them, grinning from ear to ear.

He took a tentative step forwards, his foot landing on one of the many small petals that covered the aisle, blown from the bouquets around the chair. He stopped. Tubbo heard his breath hitch.

Then, as if something had snapped, Sapnap composed himself. He began to walk, brisk and with his head held high. It was as if he owned the place.

Technically speaking, he did.

When he got to the end, he turned around. He came rushing back, shaking his head and muttering to himself; "No, that was shit. Let me do it again!"

He got back into his starting position and took another moment. He let out a deep breath. Tubbo caught his eyes snapping shut. He then walked down the path again, holding himself a lot more gracefully than he had done prior. He was more of a monarch than a general, then.

"What's he doing?" Tubbo caught Hannah asking Niki in a low tone—although not low enough to be properly discreet.

She replied with a fond smile towards their fiery friend, "I'm pretty sure he's just nervous, nothing more."

Sapnap got to the end of the aisle again, stopped, and muttered to himself again.

Velvet, the only one of their little group with a wedding ring on their finger, chuckled. "Should we tell him that he's got nothing to worry about?"

Ranboo, ever a good-doer, rushed to agree. Even Tubbo, who had always been an advocate for entertaining friendly chaos, had to admit that would be wise.

"I'll go tell him," he said. He was just about to set off down the path himself when a twisting wooden length stopped him.

"No, let me."

Karl pulled back and waited patiently, his staff tucked under his arm and a warm smile on his face. It took a while for the fireborn to snap out of his thoughts and finally notice him, but when he did it was as if the big day was here already. He rushed over, all decorum and concentration lost, and came to a screeching halt in front of him. Even with the crowd of friends around them, he had eyes for only his beloved.

"They say it's bad luck to see one another the day before the ceremony," he remarked.

"Well, I can't see anything, so it doesn't matter," Karl replied with a grin. "We'll only get partially cursed."

"I could live with that."

Karl tapped the stone in front of him. The end of his staff caught in the thin grooves in the stone slabs and crunched against some dried petals.

"The alley," he guessed.

"Yeah, it's a very long one. I haven't really mastered my entrance yet. It needs to be perfect."

"You already are," Karl smiled. He offered his arm to his fiancé, who took it gladly. "Come on, we'll walk it together."

They took a couple of steps and Tubbo suddenly had the impression that he had stumbled into a different world. A realm where everything was brighter, lighter in burdens and washed clean of a bloody History, replaced by one only marked by never-ending peace, comfortable prosperity and a tranquility unlike any other. To think that a single walk could erase so much pain and strife.

Sapnap and Karl moved in nothing less than perfect harmony. There was no rooster strut of pompous ceremony, no over the top stride worthy of a royal parade, nothing that could be traced back to any rank, high position or lineage. With Karl beside him, Sapnap's original, perfectionist attitude had disappeared completely, as had all his scars and his tense posture from a past of war. His fiancé's touch had an effect on him that no others' had before. The blazing bonfire of brash and loud words and personality had simmered to a gentle, golden candle flame. Everyone saw the change, and everyone was entranced by it.

Tubbo and the rest of the group silently followed in the couple's footsteps.

Karl's mere presence had a calming, soothing feel to it, one that subdued all tension and excitement into something pleasantly docile. It was just as enchanting as the nature of the colourful kingdom around them, from the tops of the pink pastel blossom trees to the glowing mushrooms hidden in the damp underbrush. One couldn't help but sway with his steps and his silk robes, follow the blind man blindly and give him every ounce of their trust.

Tubbo finally saw for himself why Karl deserved his place at the head of Kinoko Kingdom, and why his people were as loyal to him as they were.

Even more importantly, Tubbo saw why Sapnap loved him so.

They finally made it to the arch and stopped. Karl inhaled deeply, then turned to Sapnap. The wordless, misty gaze he gave him was vague to the outside eyes, but the fireborn seemed to understand nonetheless.

"Cherry blossoms, just as you wanted."

"I never asked for them," Karl tutted, but his smile was wide.

"I know, but they're your favourites."

Karl reached out and Sapnap helped him, bending a twisting branch to meet his fingertips. His featherlight touch skimmed over the delicate petals and the coarse bark of the twigs.

His breath was just as gentle. "I bet it looks stunning."

"It is," his fiancé agreed, "but not as stunning as you."

"Now I *know* you're lying."

Sapnap held Karl's hand. His gloved fingers adoringly trailed over his hands, rubbing over his knuckles and caressing each of his digits to the end of their nails.

"I've never been more honest," he replied, bringing his palm up to his lips. "You are the most beautiful, handsome man I have ever laid my eyes on, and I've never wanted to marry you more."

The air around the happy little gathering changed yet again. Inexplicably, everyone silently took a seat, eyes set forward and focused on the arch where the two lovers stood. The rest of Kinoko's usual street side hubbub became nothing but background noise that was easily brushed aside. There was no one else on the dojo, the only seats filled being the few on the front rows.

Ranboo sat next to Tubbo, his dust-brush tail coming to loop around his leg. He smiled at him, and Tubbo gave him one back. Near them, Hannah bounced up and down on the balls of her feet and her bottom, her wings fluttering madly. Niki had to anchor her down with a hand on her shoulder. Velvet simply leaned back to enjoy the tranquility, and George propped his head up in-between his hands.

For all Tubbo knew, this was the true ceremony itself, as simple and as heartfelt as the happy couple had undoubtedly wanted it to be. Maybe if they both weren't at the head of Kinoko, their wedding day would have been exactly like this.

Unprompted, unremarkable, and genuine.

"When I arrived in the SMP, I didn't know what was going to happen to me, and at first, I was terrified. I started fighting in wars, killing people, burning entire forests to the ground, and for a while I wondered if that was who I really was and if that was who I'd stay as. I was ready to reluctantly accept it, try and make it easier on myself, but then I met you."

Karl laughed. "You lobbed a fireball at me."

"We were in the middle of a battle and I didn't know what side you were on, what else was I supposed to do?"

"Fair point, but still."

"Alright, I admit, maybe we didn't get on the right foot. In fact, after that fireball, I was certain you hated and couldn't stand to look at me. You proved me wrong. You became my friend when others didn't dare to, stayed by my side when they deserted me, and loved me in a way I had never been loved before."

His shoulders sagged.

"I had always been told when I was a child that no one could ever love a fireborn, that we were monsters and demons of the Nether, unnatural and undeserving of anything remotely good. I thought that was what I'd have to become to survive in this place, but you changed that. And today, as I stand before you, I want you to know that I love you back, you and only you. You saved me when no one else did."

He stopped there. Tubbo wondered if he was done, but the look in his eyes told them all that he wasn't. He probably had so much more buried inside him, things that he couldn't string into words no matter how hard he tried. He just held his beloved's hand against his chest and said nothing.

With a smile, Karl spoke up.

"I have seen the wonders of a million worlds and millions of eras," he said, "and even when those wonders were taken away I still get to see them every day, all because of you. You are my eyes, the artist that paints the realms I

can no longer look at myself. You saved me. The only thing you never do describe is yourself, and I want you to do that now, please. For me."

Sapnap screwed his eyes shut and looked down. Tubbo just managed to glimpse glittering, hot tears running down his cheeks.

"I'm not worth it," he whispered.

"You are to me."

Karl's words worked their magic, and the fireborn looked up. He grinned against the tidal waves of his sobs, and sniffled.

"I'm smiling and I'm crying, because despite everything you're still here—we're still here, and we will be forever."

Neither of them got another word out, as Karl pulled them both in for a sudden and heavy kiss. It was only then that Tubbo remembered that this was not the true ceremony, as only a few hands clapped. Regardless, they did so with the thunderous applause worthy of an entire crowd.

In a way, it was better that way: just a few, good people, honest vows, genuine bursts of emotion and no need to keep up a pretense for the public eye.

The ram looked around him, taking in all the cheerful faces. Niki's hands were clasped close to her chest and she surveyed the scene with glossy eyes. Velvet let out a wolf-whistle that Hannah tried to replicate all while clapping madly. Ranboo sat up straighter, grinning, and George lay back. Tubbo was sure he saw a little flash of darkness in his gaze, something close to remorse or regret.

But there was another pair of hands that joined in, and only Tubbo seemed to notice them and their owner.

Tubbo and George, it seemed.

George leaned over the back of his chair, momentarily tearing his gaze away from the arch. He leaned in close to Tubbo. "That's one of them."

"One of them, who?"

"Those travellers in the woods."

Tubbo found that somewhat funny. He freed himself from the grip of Ranboo's tail and slipped out of his chair. He snuck over to the newcomer.

"Hi Tubbo," she greeted him brightly with a wave. Their cottontail began to twitch.

"Hey Aimsey, fancy seeing you here."

"I was just taking a walk." She looked back at the small but gathering and sighed. "I haven't been to many weddings before."

"Oh yeah?"

"No, it's not really something rabbits do, but they're so cool..."

Tubbo took another brief glance for himself. It definitely looked like something straight out of a dream. Sapnap and Karl had their arms wrapped around each other, holding on so tightly. It was enough to warm anyone's heart to bursting.

It was "cool", as Aimsey said.

"It's nice," he agreed, then turned back. "I thought you would be long gone by now."

"Eryn decided we should stay for a bit."

"Where is he?"

"Back at camp." Aimsey pointed to the slivers of rising smoke just about visible above the Kinoko woodland treeline. "Probably cooking beans on toast, it's our favourite now. That bakery definitely knows how to make some bloody good bread."

"I'm sure Velvet would be glad to hear it, although maybe not from your own mouth."

The ram pointed to the baker in question and gently coaxed Aimsey out of sight. They took a few steps down the dojo's stairs until the polished stone floor and the countless chair legs were at eye level.

Aimsey's ears drooped. "Is he still mad about Eryn threatening to burn his whole shop down?"

"You tell me."

Aimsey thought for a moment, her face scrunching up like a crumpled tissue. "Alright, good point."

"In fact, you both seem to be making quite a name for yourself here," Tubbo couldn't help but mention.

"Really?"

"Well, first there was the bakery incident, and now even the Kinoko patrols have noticed your campsite. George is starting to get suspicious."

"Who's George?"

"A member of the Kinoko Council and a good friend of its leaders. You can't blame him, though; his best friend's about to get married and he doesn't want anything to ruin it."

"Wait, all this is for his best friend?" Aimsey gestured to the decorated dojo, the streets heavy with garlands, and even the banquet tables already being set up along the cobbles. She whistled. "Woah, that's very impressive. George must love him a lot, then."

"He does."

"So who's the wedding for, exactly?"

"The leader of Kinoko Kingdom, Karl and his consort, Sapnap."

It was an answer that was so simple and natural to Tubbo, albeit a little odd considering that everyone knew about the ceremony for miles around. In particular, he would have expected the two travellers in the Kinoko woods themselves to have at least a vague idea.

He didn't expect it to get such a visceral reaction.

Aimsey's twitches stopped completely, and her ears pricked up. Her mouth hung open and her eyes grew wider. She looked from Tubbo, back to the dojo, and back again. She turned strangely pale.

The ram reached out, "Hey, you alright?"

"I..." She stepped out of his reach and hopped on her legs. "Yeah, I'm fine."

She jumped a little, probably to get a better view of the happy couple in question. Tubbo couldn't read her, and it frustrated him greatly.

He was about to open his mouth and ask why, but Aimsey beat him to it.

"I... I need to go. Eryn's probably waiting for me."

"Uh, sure."

"It was... nice to see you again, Tubbo."

"Yeah, it was nice to see you too." He paused. "Try and stay out of trouble, alright? Both of you. The SMP doesn't take kindly to suspicious strangers anymore."

"Right, trouble bad. Got it."

Tubbo took another step forward. Aimsey bolted immediately. True to her springy nature, she ran like the wind over the Northern moorland, leaping over every obstacle in her way with ease and disappearing down a gap between two houses in a matter of seconds.

The ram didn't have the energy or stamina to chase her. He didn't even know if he wanted to, or should. Fate made the choice for him.

"Hey," Ranboo called, rushing down the steps towards him. "What's up?"

Tubbo wiped the narrowed, suspicious glare of his face and plastered on a convincing smile. "Just exploring, why?"

"I don't know, you just ran off pretty quickly back there."

Of course, count on Ranboo to notice the little things. Hopefully he'd forget to write it down.

"It's nothing," Tubbo tried to reason, looking the way Aimsey ran. "Just thought I saw something."

Something strange, not that he felt like it was his place to tell anyone about it. The rabbit's flash of haunted recognition was a startling one. He had never seen anything like it before, and doubted he would again. It made him shiver.

"Saw what?"

He shrugged. "Just... something. It doesn't matter."

It definitely did.

Maybe George was right.

Whether or not Tubbo's hints were clear, Ranboo didn't seem to take particular notice—or he simply elected to ignore them.

"Niki brought some food samples to try," he said instead, taking the ram's hand. "We should go and try them before the others eat them all."

Tubbo glanced once more behind him. Although the path Aimsey had taken was still so utterly clear in his mind, his eyes couldn't help but be drawn to the decorations hanging all around him. He wondered if the glaring colours were intentional, designed to draw one's eye away from reality and the problems that plagued it. Now he was staring at the bright silks, he almost forgot what he was doing there in the first place.

Sapnap and Karl were getting married. It was a joyful time to be in the SMP.

Aimsey's hasty exit was swiftly brushed aside.

"Yeah," Tubbo agreed, "some food sounds nice right about now."

Chapter Eighteen: Bonfire

Ranboo had been to only one wedding in his lifetimes: Antfrost and Velvet's. It had been during a time of relative peace following the Eggpire's fall and had been a happy affair despite the political circumstances.

His first after-party had been quite an experience too. Between Technoblade miserably trying to teach him how to dance properly, Puffy and Niki's friendly but avid drinking competition and a firework display that almost burnt down the gazebo venue and half of Snowchester, Ranboo had been completely overwhelmed. He crashed in Tubbo's cabin early that night. However, as the celebrations calmed down, he had watched from the window as the party guests dwindled in numbers and went home.

Techno and Phil sang boisterously through the snowy streets, earning them less than friendly shouts from the sleeping people from the windows above. Puffy had kissed Sam while they were both enveloped in a giddy, drunken stupor after he escorted her back home and yanked him inside her cabin, slamming the door behind them. Niki and Tubbo shared smiles and bids of goodnight on the deck of the ram's own cabin, taking a moment or two to catch up on old times. Antfrost carried his new husband to a secluded honeymoon getaway beside the frozen seashore.

They were all undeniably happy as they did so, and that was what made the dazzling spectacle of marriage worth it to Ranboo, in the end.

There was no reason why Sapnap and Karl's would be any different.

The rest of the day passed by rather quickly, with good company and good work along the way. The final preparations were made for the next day, lists and food were double checked and tasted, and before Ranboo knew it late evening had rolled around. He barely had any time to breathe until he, Niki, George and Sapnap headed off into the forest.

As the sun finished setting, the treeline grew darker and the canopy cut off the sky. After a few minutes, the red sunlight bled into total obscurity. They couldn't see two steps in front of them, and their path was only illuminated by the faint orange glare of Sapnap's skin. He led them through the black maze of trunks like a fiery will-o'-the-wisp, and just as teasingly malicious.

"You know, now would be the perfect time for an assassin to jump on us."

"Sap," Niki scolded, "you're going to scare George and Ranboo to death."

"And not you?"

"You'll need a lot more than that to faze me."

Sapnap's chuckle was dark and thoughtful. "Challenge accepted."

He beckoned them towards a patch of hazy blue light in the distance, and they came out into a large clearing. Now the trees' cover had been lifted, the ground sparkled with the milky light of the moon. It was a decently large area, slightly slanted down a hill, layered with small patches of pebbles and faintly beaten tracks in the short grass from the woodland animals. It seemed like it had been chosen a long time in advance: in the center stood an unlit bonfire.

"Gentlemen—and lady—welcome to the wildest night of your lives!"

Sapnap tore off his glove and snapped his fingers, then lobbed his summoned fireball at the pyre. The beast was hit with a bang and began to crackle and roar as its insides were burnt to smithereens. Flames licked up the edifice and reached furiously for the sky. The moonlight was cast aside, overtaken by a vibrant blanket of orange and red light that danced across the shadows and dips in the uneven terrain.

To be fair, that did indeed startle Niki a little, who jumped at the sudden explosion. Ranboo took a step back and marveled at the glowing sparks that tumbled out from the bonfire like glitter. He almost trod on George's foot and apologized, realizing a moment later that he didn't say anything back.

When Ranboo turned, he saw that George wasn't looking at the fiery display but rather at the clearing all around them. He had barely taken a single step out of the treeline. He looked ready to rush back into it at any given moment.

Even when Sapnap rushed towards the pyre, whooping loudly, arms outstretched and calling them to him, George didn't move.

His eyes were wide and haunted, a gaze Ranboo had been used to seeing so many times in his own reflection.

"Hey, you alright?"

George shook his head, "It's this place. Something terrible happened here, back then. Innocent blood was spilt and..." He looked at Ranboo. "Does Sapnap know about Dream's massacre?"

Startled, Ranboo gulped. "No, I don't think he did."

The hybrid didn't even know about it himself. He wanted to nag George for more details, but was interrupted by Sapnap.

"What are you waiting for? Get over here!"

He pulled out a bottle from his bag and popped the cork. It flew off into the dark with a loud bang. Champagne started to pour out in a steady golden stream.

Ranboo swallowed down his newly found worry, again. He turned to George. He still hadn't moved an inch.

Ranboo took his hand. "It's too late now to do anything about it," he told him with a sigh.

"This place will bring us bad luck, trust me. We shouldn't be here."

Like a stubborn mule, George stayed put. Ranboo, just as stubbornly, held on tightly."

"I know, but there's no going back. We just need to try and forget it, just for tonight."

"I'm sorry, but I can't forget things as easily as you. I remember everything."

He made it sound like he had really been there. He probably had been. The thought made Ranboo's hair stand up on edge.

He sheepishly tried to offer up a remedy, "Well, I heard alcohol is very good at helping with these sorts of things."

George abruptly tore his gaze away from the clearing and stared straight at Ranboo. The hybrid immediately regretted every single syllable that had just come out of his mouth.

George seemed to think otherwise.

"It's never sounded more enticing."

Finally, his feet were uprooted, and Ranboo was glad for it.

They rejoined their two friends, who after a couple of unsupervised minutes were already fighting over the champagne like squabbling children.

The stag night promised to be a wild and boisterous party, an evening so glorious that it rivaled all others, but it quickly became tame after half an hour.

What started off as the four of them prancing round the flames, singing songs at the top of their lungs and drinking to high heavens soon ended with them hunkering down beside the fire; a third on the floor, a third on their home-brought bedding and a third on each other. The drink and bottles still flowed, domesticated in cups and goblets instead of being gulped down straight from their natural habitat. Niki's pastries that everyone would have devoured on a normal day were savoured far slower than they had ever been before, all of them trying to drag the night out forever.

The alcohol started to burn Ranboo's throat and started messing up more of his mind. He was glad he had bought the hangover cures from the Snowchester alchemist when he had. A couple of drops here and there kept him awake and aware, but not too much to spoil the fun. He could still relish in the numbness of his body, the relaxed state of mind and simply appreciate the oddly comfortable surroundings he found himself squished in.

"Here's to our dear fiery friend," he announced, raising his glass.

"Here's to the last crumb of freedom he'll ever see," George added, now all smiles and sparkling eyes.

Niki joined in with a smug grin.

Sapnap sighed, "You're all idiots."

"But we're your idiots," Niki reminded him, her head propped up on his belly.

"Lucky me!"

The fireborn downed his drink in one impressive gulp. He then held the goblet between his fingers and craned his neck up towards the sky. From Ranboo's perspective, he only saw his stubbled jaw and neck. He could still however see how he clenched it, and the nervous bob of his Adam's apple in his throat.

The hybrid sat up a little. "Are you okay?"

"I just... This isn't a mistake, right? I'm doing the right thing, aren't I?"

Cold feet were dangerous things in times like these ones.

Ranboo rushed to reply, "Yeah, you are. Absolutely."

"Karl loves you, and you love him," Niki said, shrugging. "That's reason enough to go through with it."

"But what if I hurt him?"

The "again" was left unspoken.

Sapnap slipped off one of his gloves and rubbed at a thick, bumpy scar running around the whole of his wrist, left over by something tight and clamped around him so long ago.

"Maybe they were right," he muttered, to himself more than anything, "maybe fireborns are nothing but monsters..."

"If anyone truly thought that, you wouldn't be where you are today."

When George spoke, he did so with an assurance that none of them had ever heard from him before. They all turned to listen.

George's gaze was trained into the depths of his glass. His index circled the rim absent-mindedly.

"And even if you were a monster, I know you. You have a big heart and can love deeply, and that's worth a lot. Even if you change, that will always redeem you even a little."

"That didn't redeem Dream," the fireborn said.

"Maybe not in your eyes."

George's statement was met with silence, and he drank the rest of his goblet.

Ranboo changed the subject. "What about Karl? Is he having a party?"

"Oh gods, no," Sapnap laughed. "He hates things like this. He's probably in the library with a good book or going to bed early."

"I've always wondered," Niki began, taking a bite out of a cookie, "where does Karl come from exactly?"

Sapnap shrugged. "He never told me, and I never asked. The present is far more important to us than the past or the far future, so we like to stay there when we can."

It was fair enough, but something about that statement seemed a little off. With Sapnap, living in the moment was undoubtedly an accurate part of his philosophy: his impulsive side would demand it, and Ranboo had seen it for himself.

With Karl, on the other hand...

It felt like a lie.

While Sapnap seized the present with a searing iron grip, Karl seemed to be more like someone who would gently stroke the past, keep it closely in his touch, and nurture the shoots of a future that sprouted from the earth. The present was certainly not his realm—one could see it in his eyes before he lost his sight, and hear it in his words and movements afterwards. When giving out fragments of History and ancient knowledge in leaders' meetings, he did so with a clear voice and a grounded, matured attitude that rivaled all others. Anywhere else, he seemed to float through his lives like a ghost, a phantom of another time who had been plucked from eternity and cast down to the mortal plain.

The only bit of History that the Kinoko leader seemed reluctant to tell was his own. Ranboo had a feeling they had all moved on way too quickly from that, and put too much trust in someone who could have been a serial murderer for all they knew.

That would be hypocritical of him. Anyone could argue that Ranboo was in the exact same situation.

But back to the question at hand, it all boiled down to the same thing, "Your wedding is the best decision either of you have ever made, because you love each other."

Sapnap pondered his answer for a while, and finally smiled. "It has to be, right? We've waited so long to make tomorrow perfect."

"That's the spirit."

"Alright, cool." Clearly reassured, Sapnap shifted against the log, jostling his friends with him. "Now, with that aside and now we're all likely drunk enough to be honest; tell us all first time you fell in love with someone. I'll go first: Karl and Quackity."

The sudden mention of the second name surprised everyone.

"Quackity?"

"Yeah, it used to be the three of us, inseparable and madly in love."

Ranboo couldn't remember even seeing them talking, and he doubted his memory book did either. "What happened?"

"What do you think? War, and greed. We took separate paths, and Quackity chose Las Nevadas over us."

Knowing what happened to that once thriving casino kingdom in the end made it all so much sadder than Ranboo had anticipated it to be.

"Do you miss him?"

"A little," the fireborn replied, "but I've learned that I need to spend my energy on those who love me more than money."

He surveyed them all with a fond gaze, teasingly so when it came to Niki.

"Bold of you to assume I wouldn't leap at the chance to sell you for a pittance," she clapped back.

"Of course you would," he snickered in return, still grinning. "What about you, Niki? First love, go."

"Truthfully speaking, it would be Puffy. She'll probably also be my last as well."

"Shit." He carded his fingers through her hair. "I'm sorry..."

"Eh, don't be," she shrugged, holding out her glass for Ranboo to fill again. "What's past is past. As you said, we should live in the present, and I'm very happy where I am right now."

"With Hannah?"

"And Velvet," she added, "with them both. Things are going well."

"Glad to hear it."

Sapnap and Niki knocked their glasses together, a seemingly subtle ending to something that only they could understand.

The next victim of Sapnap's little game was not, as Ranboo had expected, George. The fireborn seemed on the verge of asking him, but the flash of darkness in his eyes and George's own refusal to raise his own apparently gave him an answer already.

Sapnap turned to Ranboo. "Well, Ender Boy?"

He shrugged. "Probably Tubbo."

It was the obvious choice, but it shocked everyone nonetheless. Ranboo didn't know for what reasons until George wolf-whistled.

"I didn't know you had anything romantic going on between you."

The hybrid spluttered, "Wait, what? No! I meant as a close friend. He's everything to me. You can technically be in love with someone without wanting to fuck them, right?"

He had never thought he'd hear such a sudden, dirty expression come out from his own mouth. Champagne certainly worked a charm.

The three others were quiet for a second or two, deep in thought. It was Niki who broke it.

"Yeah, you're right. Love has no boundaries or rules."

"There we go," Ranboo sighed. "Therefore, I'm in love with Tubbo."

No one could argue that, and no one did. They all seemed content with their respective answers. Their little party quietened down once again.

When they all began to teeter on the edge of a deep slumber, Sapnap raised the final glass of the night.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "Each one of you has made me what I am today, and spending my last chapter with you is an honour. I don't know what else to say. You're all amazing, and I love you more than I can say."

He leaned down and kissed Niki on the forehead, ruffled Ranboo's hair, and pulled George closer to his side. Every gesture was met with a smile and a laugh or two, but above all warm hearts and a loving toast each.

"Here's to tomorrow's happy couple!" Niki cried, followed by the other two boys.

"To Karlnap!" George smiled at his own clever mix of their names.

Everything that Ranboo would have wanted to say had already been said. He instead gave Sapnap the only thing he really could.

He smiled.

Niki fell asleep first, comfortably curled up against Sapnap. Ranboo was probably next, but he was woken up later on after hearing voices talking in a whisper. After the number of drinks he had, every sound was loud to his ears.

"George, what's wrong?"

A pause.

"Nothing."

"You've been acting weirdly all night."

"It's just this place. Why did you choose it?"

"What do you mean?"

"This was where Clay murdered those civilians."

A long, awkward silence ensued.

"I didn't know that," Sapnap confessed, quietly apologetic.

"That was my fault. I didn't tell many people about it. That... That night was the last time Clay talked to me properly before the battle."

"Properly?"

No reply.

"George."

"This was where he truly broke my heart."

"Gogy, I didn't know about that either. I'm so sorry—"

"It's fine." It clearly wasn't. Ranboo heard a small snuffle and a sigh. "I, just... I wish he was here. Gods, I wish things turned out differently and that he was here with us."

"When I said I didn't live in the past anymore, I lied. I keep thinking about him, about us, and what I could have done to prevent it all. I come up with a million answers and each one just cuts a little deeper. There was so much I could have done, and I never made the effort to..."

The wind rushed through the nearby trees, its whistle all too eerily human to be of any comfort. It made Ranboo shiver.

"Sapnap, have we failed?"

"Failed what?"

"The Dream Team, Clay, even ourselves. We came to the SMP first, we were from the beginning. We've lived through everything, and maybe there was a way we could have stopped it. Is all of this our fault?"

For his own peace of mind, Ranboo didn't want to fathom the answer.

He made a huge show of stirring in his sleep, perhaps even on the brink of waking up. Sapnap's hand came down onto his shoulder, delicious warmth leaking through his glove. Ranboo arched into it. He closed his eyes again.

"How come you're so close to Ranboo and Niki?" asked George. "I never thought to ask."

"It's a long story, to do with my exile."

"We have the whole night ahead of us. Could you tell me?"

And potentially reveal the existence of the Syndicate?

Ranboo *hoped* Sapnap was smarter than that.

Maybe in a time of peace, it wouldn't have mattered as much to keep it a secret, but it was more of that. It was a fraternity that binded even across the seas, time, and even life and death itself. Speaking of it aloud would leave a crack, and there was no telling how long it would take for it to be torn apart completely.

"I don't know why I said it's a long story," the fireborn said. "They just helped me when I needed it and we fought the Egg together. They're as much a family to me as you are."

Ranboo almost leapt up and gave him a hug right there and then, but blowing his façade was definitely not a good idea. He instead stayed still with a tight throat and a hammering heart.

"I would give up my three lives for each of you in a heartbeat. Niki was right: love has no rules or boundaries. I love you all."

I love you all.

Ranboo slept peacefully that night, and he had some of the happiest dreams of his lives. The smile on his face was one of the brightest he had ever beared.

Chapter Nineteen: Just A Little

The kingdom, Sam learned, had no name. It didn't really need one.

The shared stretch of land it sat on was the only civilized one for weeks worth of walking and sailing around. No wonder very few in it knew of the redstone academies or the SMP: little interest was to be had in the nations or the world beyond their own borders.

Four kingdoms that made it up were named the North, the South, the East and the West.

Sylvee was the ruler of the South. It was perhaps not the largest, but one of the most prosperous. The sea front allowed for trading opportunities with passing ships, the pine forests a steady supply of timber, and now the mountains with their newly found redstone ore. Mining operations were already well on the way.

Beyond the mountain chain lay the North. It was not a frigid, arctic place as the name might have made ignorant travellers think, but rather a mild land of rolling hills and marshlands, some of which had bled over its borders with the South. The monarch who ruled there was on relaxed and friendly terms with Queen Sylvee. He was a young but kind man who had been on his throne longer than many others had, and who had offered his loving help and

support to the queen and her people after her husband's passing and during the Blue Plague.

The East was the wildest of the four. It wasn't under any one rule, but rather divided between a number of dukedoms and held together by strong treaties whose origins dated back hundreds of years. Each oligarch's personal relation with the neighbouring kingdoms of the South, North and West differed. They prioritized the East's numerous treaties over international collaboration. They were rarely involved in any wars or confrontations, and mainly seemed to turn up on diplomatically as excuses to attend balls and mingle above all else.

The West was the sole strenuous relationship any of the other nations had. The animosity stretched back so far that many forgot what the rivalries were all about in the first place, and more importantly dashed any hope at ever solving them. Keeping peace with it when they could had always been the South's main diplomatic priority, although it was hard when a new Western monarch seemed to turn up to balls even just two months apart from one another. Some called foul play, others claimed it was done on purpose to confuse and surprise their enemies. Queen Sylvee called it rude to pry and greeted each new ruler with the same warm smile and handshake. No one asked any questions.

With only the four realms being as close as they were, frequent events and meetings were important to keep up appearances and friendships.

One of these was the Saint-Jacques Ball, a summer celebration in honour of the ocean, the golden beaches and the stories it carried along with the tide.

"It's one of the biggest annual events in our calendar," Sam's sister told him when he asked about the shockingly large number of blue silk banners that had popped up over every inch of the alabaster walls overnight.

And as luck would have it, the Queen's brother had re-emerged from oblivion just in time for it.

The ball, but also the tournament that preceded it.

"You're an idiot."

"I'm a bold one."

"Nope, just a regular idiot." Puffy helped heave the golden chest-plate over his head and secured it in place. It was heavier than Sam remembered. He hadn't needed to wear his armour in ages. "Have you ever jousting before?"

"When I was younger."

That was probably the reason why Sylvee pressed him to take part.

"I hate to break it to you, but that was a rather long time ago now."

"I'm *not* old."

"No, but you're inexperienced. This whole thing is madness."

"Have *you* ever jousted?"

"Absolutely not."

"There we go. I know what I'm doing. I'm going to be fine."

"Sam, you're going up against powerful, trained knights. Not only that, but Corpse has been the reigning champion for seven years now."

"You've done your research," he remarked playfully.

Puffy lay her hands on his armoured chest. "Of course I did, I'm worried."

He held her hands. "I'll be fine. I'll crush them all."

She scoffed, raising an eyebrow. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. The competition looks easy enough."

"You're getting a little cocky there, love."

As if to prove her point, she tossed him his lance. He struggled to catch it with his stiff gauntlets, earning him a teasing laugh. He felt his face flush red.

She also gave him his helmet, smoothing back the feather panache. "Don't get too arrogant, alright? If you lose, do so with dignity and kindness."

"And if I win?"

"Same thing. No one likes an obnoxious bragger—gods know there are too many of them at court already."

"I promise," he vowed, then leaned in. "Last kiss for good luck?"

"Oh no, this is *your* funeral."

She blew him one anyway before she left the tent. Sam checked his armour one last time, put on his helmet, took his lance in hand and left the cool shadows of the tent. Outside, the harsh summer sun crashed down on his armour. In a minute or two, he was already cooking alive in his own sweat. By the end the tournament was certain he'd drown in it.

A stable hand ran up to him, a muscled white mare on a leading reign in tow. Sam mounted and settled in the saddle, reaching out to pat the horse's neck.

"What's her name?" he asked.

"Fran, sir," the young boy chirped, stumbling over his words and quickly correcting himself. "Your Highness."

He handed Sam his shield.

Fran.

What a coincidence.

Sam led his steed towards the list field. His opponents were already lined up and waiting, some with their helmets already on. The crowd beyond was growing restless, and when they were restless, they became loud. He recognized a few of the fighters and their coats of arms in passing, but only really knew one of them.

Corpse sat astride a stallion with a coat as black as his own pelt, head held high. When Sam approached, he greeted him respectfully.

"Good luck, Your Highness," he said. A fanfare of trumpets sounded, and he spurred his horse forward.

Sam joined the moving line. One by one, each competitor rode out to a shower of applause.

Sam put his helmet on and whispered in Fran's ear. "Let's put on a show, girl."

He put his visor down just in time for his cue, and galloped out into the light. The clapping and cheering deafened every one of his senses, and all he could hear was his breath echoing eerily inside the smelly, sweaty depths of his helmet.

He was announced as Queen Sylvee's brother, visiting from a faraway land. He never thought he'd ever hear the words "Lord Samuel, the Thunder of the Badlands", but there they were. The Southerners went wild.

A few of the riders rode anonymously, likely sons and daughters of overprotective parents who didn't approve of their children participating in the competition. They kept their visors and heads down, except for one with a petite frame and a silvery white panache who galloped down the field on a plucky, lively steed.

Sam could only just about pick out his sister in the royal box, seated next to the other royal guests. He couldn't see Puffy anywhere, but he could certainly *hear* Michelle. She cheered loudest of all and proudly told everyone in earshot that the golden thunder was none other than her own father.

It was that little spark of love that gave Sam the last boost of confidence he needed.

For someone who hadn't participated in a proper joust, let alone worn armour and held a lance for years now, he did pretty well.

Actually, that was a disgusting understatement.

He *dominated* the competition.

One after another, each of his adversaries fell to the sandy floor. Each of his hits were met by cries of jubilation from the stands, and every single one only blew up his ego a little more. Before he knew it, he was thriving—no, *living*—off the crowd's praise. It only made him more of a threat.

He even managed to beat Corpse.

The second the cat's body hit the ground, everyone gasped. The unbeatable champion, beaten? It felt almost set up.

Many Western sceptics probably thought it was. A stunt made up by the queen to glorify her family lineage. Even Sam stuttered and wondered if Corpse was bribed somewhere down the line.

However, when the guard captain took off his helmet, there was no trace of contempt. There was a cold but genuine stare of surprise, and a twinkle within Sam had rarely seen.

He knew then and there he had finally and fully gained his favour, and his loyalty—not that it would amount to much when he eventually set sail again. It was still nice enough while it lasted.

Unsurprisingly to everyone who had witnessed his thundering rise in the jousting tournament, he got to the final. What was even more surprising to him, however, was his opponent.

That nameless, silver wisp of a warrior had somehow risen just as dramatically as he had, and now they were about to face off.

Sam was still riding his triumphant high, and that admittedly blinded him. The rational decisions and level-headed logic he had been known for once had left him in the dust. The adrenaline of victory fuelled him. He was a powerful machine ready and rearing to go.

He let down his guard.

Both horses charged towards one another from opposite sides of the wooden divide. Hooves thundered against the ground, clouds of sand flew up in blinding clouds. Sam's anxious breath shuddered through his armour.

In the flurry, he lost his grip on his shield.

His gaze wavered. That was the moment he knew he had signed away his first place.

His adversary was small, but their technique was quick. Sam didn't even see the lance lined up with the side of his hip until it was too late.

The collision was brutal and sent him sprawling to the ground. His helmet flew off. The sudden burst of light blinded him. The world was ringing all around him, and he didn't hear the gasps or the clapping. He didn't hear his mare gallop away and fight the squires who tried to yank her back into submission. He didn't even hear the armoured footsteps hit the floor and walk over to him until he just about managed to heave his aching body into a half-sitting position, propped up by his forearms.

He squinted against the sun.

The winner took off her helmet, shaking free her brown and white curls.

Sam let his head fall back into the sand. "You said you didn't know how to joust," he grumbled.

"I don't," Puffy agreed, breathless, flushed and not even bothering to hide her pride. "Beginner's luck, I guess."

She stood over him, armour's glare burning and the sun's golden disk framing her head like a halo. She looked like a goddess. His divinity, and his retribution.

"Now," she said in a sing-song voice, leaning in closer. "This is where your cockiness gets you."

Sam sighed, completely and utterly defeated. He took her outstretched hand, and she helped him up. The back of his body, from his shoulder blades to his calves hurt like hell.

She seemed to notice. "I'll make it up to you," she promised him.

"You better, I'm not turning up to the ball with a broken back."

Although, quite honestly, the only thing that had been seriously bruised was his ego. Sylvee made that very clear by the way she was laughing at him from the royal stand. Even the guards that flanked her chuckled.

He realized that didn't matter. Beside him, Puffy was beaming. Applause rained down on her in steady, joyful streams. In the end, that made him smile. He gripped her hand and held it up high, and the cheers grew louder.

"Congratulations," he whispered in her ear. "You deserve it."

Her victorious grin grew only wider.

Even afterwards, when Sam was approached by beaten rivals who congratulated and commiserated his defeat in the final, he didn't brag or rage. He boiled every one of his answers down to Puffy's own talent and fierce fighting techniques. He sang of her qualities, not his own.

Then the other knights would go and find her, and give her the good natured attention and praise she deserved. When one of the swift conversations would devolve into a more flirty territory, however, she'd cast him a look. Sam wouldn't hesitate to step in. He'd brush past the miserable suitor, make his presence known, slyly slip in a pet name that she'd respond to. That usually did the trick.

There was only once where even as they left, a knight still insisted on trying to get her to go to the ball with them and even get them a special dinner reservation. They had to close the tent behind them to finally shoo them away.

The air inside was cooler than the sweltering heat outdoors, and Sam finally got to take off his armour. Puffy did the same, then helped him with a stubborn buckle or two. When he was finally free—clothes soaked through, red and sore everywhere—she pressed against his chest.

"Thanks for stepping in back there," she murmured.

"You don't deserve to be treated like that." He made her look at him, a hand smoothing back her wet, tangled mess of woollen curls. "You're so much more than what they see you as."

"Oh." A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "So this is *not* about you being jealous?"

"Pff, jealousy? What jealousy?"

"You tell me. Maybe I should go and accept the invitation after all..."

He laughed, finally giving in. It didn't take much. "Alright, maybe I was a *little* jealous. Just a little though."

"Just a little," she agreed.

She captured him in a heated embrace he was only too glad to reciprocate.

Everything them stank of exhaustion, frazzled gunpowder musk and damp wool. Every kiss tasted of salt, addictively so. It would have probably repulsed them both if they weren't both so far gone to one another's touch. Sam had never been so proud to bear a bruise, and never more in love with the culprit who had given it to him. The dull pain, the tiredness, the heat, the ferocity of their kiss; everything drove him crazy. The inside of the tent heated up, baking them both alive. His brain was reduced to sticky, love-stricken mush.

The week-long restraint for fear of infuriating the watchful guards and courtiers of the palace had built up considerably. It was itching to explode.

Puffy's grip on his back, at first soft and careful, had turned clawed. When she parted their kiss, it was to gasp out a question.

"Should we wait until—?"

Sam pushed her against the support pole planted in the middle of the tent. The whole canopy above them wobbled.

"Everyone's probably heading back up to get ready for the banquet," he whispered, panting. "We have time."

Sam thought they did, at least.

At that moment, the tent's entrance burst open. Michelle rushed in.

"You were so awesome, Ma!" she cried. "No one saw any of it coming! You were like a superhero!"

They pulled away abruptly from one another as Michelle leapt into Puffy's arms. Sam's fuzzy head and tornado of emotions died down. He finally regained his senses—and the battered state of his body.

Ouch.

He noted with a tinge of amusement that all of his daughter's cheer directed at him had disappeared completely. He gave Michelle a peck on the cheek.

"And what about me?" he asked.

She looked at him. "Yeah, you were cool too, for a bit."

"You know what, I'll take it."

His loss was punishment enough for his overconfidence. He should reap the rewards where he could.

Puffy kissed him again, sweet rather than searing despite her still furiously blushing cheeks, and Michelle gave him a hug. Sam realized he wouldn't rather have anything else.

Glory and prestige be damned. He was happy where he was.

The high Puffy's win lasted only for a brief period of time. When they came back to the palace, some views hadn't changed. The Westerners, still salty over their own losses to the South—an apparently relatively common occurrence—looked at her with side-eyes of disdain. One word from Tina assured her that yes, that too was a common side-effect of being associated with the South.

Puffy was certain, however, that being judged by what felt like the entirety of the South's own army was something else.

The stares she got, although not openly hostile, were cold and stern enough to rip that triumphant delight away.

The only one who really did smile her way was one of the lieutenants, Seepeekay, and even then she wondered if it wasn't just out of pure politeness. For some reason, she couldn't wrap her head around the idea

that he was a friend, no strings attached. There always had to be *something*, right?

After the banquet where she ate very little, and after tucking Michelle into bed, midnight came around. Guests were called to the ball. Out in the hallway, doors slammed and courtiers laughed shrilly among themselves.

Puffy waited until silence fell before glancing over to the uniform lying the bed beside her. Crimson red, golden tassels and buttons, stitched with rolling patterns of shining blue waves and swirls, and complete with a tricorn mounted with magnificent white ostrich feathers, it was a uniform she would have jumped at the opportunity to wear, let alone own for herself.

Now it didn't seem so appealing.

She instead settled for a coral chiffon gown embroidered with strings of pearls, laid out as a second resort. It quickly became her one and only. She hastily put it on, didn't even have the time to do her hair properly, and rushed out of her room.

At the top of the grand marble staircase, long since deserted as the rush of guests had already filed into the ballroom close to half an hour ago, the world seemed to stop.

At least, it did for her.

The combination of the height, the splendor and the judgemental paintings on the walls was dizzying. She held on tightly to the thick, polished handrail, and took her time. Every single step she took echoed like the rhythmic beating of a metronome in the vast, arched grandeur of a cathedral.

Sam looked up the way she came. In a royal, gilded uniform with a silk sash and a regal waiting stance, he looked no different to many of the other guests, and yet she was still certain she'd be able to pick him out among many. His eyes were filled with starlight.

"Teenage me would be going crazy right now," he chuckled. "This is the stuff of fairytales."

Despite the circumstances, that quip made her smile, and she purposely took her time. He took her hand as she trotted down the last few steps.

"I thought you had a uniform tailored," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"The less I look like a sea captain, the better."

She cast a look around them. The guards by the doors seemed to be looking straight ahead, but they were only pretending. Every one of her moves was watched carefully. She knew fully well why, and she hadn't wanted to take any chances.

Sam wasn't an idiot despite what she'd claim out of teasing frustration, and perhaps that was as much of a flaw as it was a quality. That meant he knew her all too well, and noticed even the slightest change or discrepancy.

His whole face softened, awe slowly molting into something deeper and a lot more mature than a childish, gleeful infatuation.

"Well I for one think you look gorgeous either way," he said. "To hell with what anyone else says or believes."

She wished it could be that easy, but the compliment nevertheless didn't fail to warm her heart.

She pulled back and took a good look at him. "Nice uniform," she teased, amused by the way he puffed up his chest.

"You don't like it?" Sam rolled his shoulders back. "I think it looks distinguished."

She brushed a bit of lint off the lapels. "It's just funny to see you dressed up nowadays."

"Really?"

"Well, since we left the SMP, you've been looking more scruffy than anything."

"Me, scruffy? Ouch." He nudged her playfully and she fell against his shoulder. "Maybe I was, but that's changed. I've got to keep something of an image. Can you believe it, they're all addressing me as Your Highness!"

"Your Highness, huh?"

"It feels weird."

"I can imagine."

He tugged at his sleeve. "Am I really that out of place?"

She gave him a half-hearted smile. "We both are," she admitted. "And no smart uniform or pretty dress will be able to fix that."

"I figured." His shoulders sagged and he looked elsewhere.

Puffy bit her lip. She hated seeing him like this, so defeated and melancholic. She nudged him. "But that doesn't mean you don't look handsome in one."

That indeed put a something of a small smile on his face. "You've really missed that, haven't you?"

"What, you looking good? How could I, we see each other every day."

He whistled. "Now *that* was smooth."

"I learned from the best."

He held out his arm, and she took it. They began to walk.

The halls felt a little lighter with Sam in them. He had been easing into palace life quite fast in the week they had spent there, and Puffy thought that she had as well, to a degree. She was still looking forward to finally getting back to the sea. It missed her desperately, calling to her through the night with shrill cries and a siren's song that enchanted her senses.

It almost dragged her back early. She almost caved in.

"Puffy?"

They stopped at the door. Sam waved to the footmen. They stood back, hands away from the handles and obediently awaiting orders.

Sam turned Puffy towards him. "Are you alright, really?"

"I'm just a little tired from the joust."

That wasn't entirely untrue; her arms still ached from the weight of the lance and the shield. It still wasn't everything.

"We don't have to attend," Sam said to her. "We could just go to bed and spend some time alone—"

"No," she quickly interrupted, taking his arm again. "I want to go. It could be fun."

Could.

Resigned, she was the one who ordered the doors to be opened, She didn't flinch when the orchestra's music crashed onto her ears or when the bright candlelight spilled through the threshold.

"The Queen's brother, Lord Samuel, and his..."

The usher hesitated.

"... friend, Captain Puffy."

She matched his confident stride perfectly, with the same air of nobility about her as he had. She was relieved she wore the dress in the end. At least the prying eye of the court wouldn't see her trembling legs beneath the skirts.

"I thought you'd never come."

Sylvee reached up on her toes and left a kiss on Sam's cheek.

"I took a while to get ready," he replied, embracing her back with a familiarity that would have been considered highly improper if he wasn't who he was. "I'm not too used to balls anymore."

"You look great," the queen assured him with a smile. She turned to the man by her side. "May I introduce you to King Wisp of the North..."

As Sam bowed and began to talk to the Northern monarch, Puffy's eyes wandered.

As was not unusual for a ball, glances were cast her way. In passing, but also in judgemental scrutiny. Some whispers followed.

Perhaps the court wondered why she stayed so close to Sam. Maybe they were jealous of their "friendship". It was possible that they also saw her as nothing; a woman who'd be nothing but a brief infatuation to the queen's brother. If only they knew.

The court could be a friendly place on the right days, and a deadly one on the wrong ones. It all depended when and where they crossed each other's paths.

Most of the nobles, Puffy was surprised to find out, were kind and courteous. They were fascinated by her first introduction to the Queen and her life on the high seas. Puffy had spent many oddly pleasant afternoons entertaining dukes, baronesses, marchionesses, viscounts and all in between with her tales of sea monsters, fighting pirates and searching for long lost treasures.

They were all so much higher in rank than she was and yet were as attentive as a gaggle of enthralled schoolchildren, staring with wide-eyed awe and rambling off a million curious questions.

Some nobles, however, reacted to her the same way as most of the guards did. The reason she told so many good stories was because she was a good liar, she knew a pirate's strategies because she was one, she'd rob them blind and slit their throats at the first opportunity—she had heard it all.

Those courtiers were easier to ignore than the soldiers were. They could run their mouths off into the sunset, but would never act on any threats. She wondered how many of them had actually picked up a sword in their lifetime. The army on the other hand said very little, but would definitely cut her down if she set one single hoof out of line.

There were more of one than the other at the midnight ball. Puffy managed to hold her head higher than she would have otherwise.

"...and you must be the famous Captain Puffy." King Wisp was talking to her now, and she bowed. "Congratulations on your win today, what a show. We've heard a lot about you. Your reputation precedes you."

"I think it'd be wise of me not to ask what rumours have been going around about me," she couldn't help but say with a forced laugh. "They're probably not very flattering."

"The South's court must have a lot more bite in it than I remember then. That, or Her Majesty is lying to me somewhere..."

He teased her, and Sylvee teased him right back with a complicity that only rulers of an equal standing could have. "Every word I've told you is the truth, Wisp; Captain Puffy is remarkable, and we are honoured to have her here."

The tips of her ears flushed red. She was still in shock when Sam moved them along and only broke out of it when he chuckled.

"Look at you, winning the favours of kings and queens alike. First in the SMP, now here. I bet you could rally a whole loyal arsenal of royalty if you wanted to. You should start keeping a tally."

"Sam, what did you tell your sister?"

"Nothing but the truth, but I didn't need to. She has two eyes and a smart brain, and she used them for herself."

Puffy was still stunned. "I just thought that I'd be liked a lot less here..."

"I'm sorry to say, darling, but you thought wrong."

It was more surprising than reassuring to her. She scanned the crowd in search of more screwed up, haughty expressions cast her way. There were still a few, especially after the conversation with King Wisp, many of which were from the South's own high ranking military officials in attendance.

It didn't take a genius to know who had been almost singlehandedly responsible for *that* slice of hostility.

"Is he watching us?"

They both knew who the "he" Sam referred to was. She looked over his shoulder. Amber fire shot through her from afar, as blazing and sharp as ever.

"Always," she sighed, hoof nervously tapping the ballroom floor.

"Good."

Sam leaned in and kissed her. In front of everyone this time, not behind secluded corners or in the heated crimson depths of a closed tent.

It was an embrace full of love, as it always was, but also one of display.

She crossed eyes with Corpse a moment later. The cat's muzzle scrunched up. He pursed his lips and turned away, sulking off to gods know where.

She didn't care. That meant she wouldn't feel the need to watch her back every five seconds. She finally built up the courage to return the sudden kiss.

"There. Now everyone knows you're in a lord's high, loving favour," Sam whispered matter-of-factly, parting them sweetly with a stroke to her jaw. "No one will ever have anything on you now."

It somehow meant even more than a royal pardon to her ears.

To him, it was that simple to solve, so easy. It would have been the first problem in History to have actually been solved by a single kiss. Puffy could try to fool herself into believing that it really worked, at least for a while.

They mingled around for a while and talked to a number of strangers. Puffy forgot all their names and titles three seconds after leaving their side. They all, unsurprisingly, came to exchange greetings with the queen's brother. The captain by his side was a mere afterthought. They were polite to her, but not much else.

Sam remedied that often, humorously introducing her as his "good friend". They had both found the usher's quip needlessly formal, and thus hilarious. There was certainly a reaction to be had when he would drop a romantic nickname here and there and she'd wear it with pride, or vice-versa.

Yes it was petty, but it lightened Puffy's awkward load of fears for that evening's outcome. Sam knew that, and he played it up even while accepting praises and compliments on his impacting influence in the Queen's cabinet. The redstone in particular seemed to be the focus of many.

Puffy had to admit it was not her own. She understood very little of it and although the passion with which Sam talked about it always gripped her attention, their lavish surroundings managed to drag her attention away.

She spared a glance for the dancers in the center of the room. The floor underneath their feet was polished and still smelt of fresh wax. Some guests swayed to the tunes, others patiently drank from their glasses and initiated conversation with the first person they laid their eyes on.

The music stopped long enough for partners to switch, leave and enter the floor. It picked up again soon after, orchestrating a melody she recognized.

The slowed down tune of an old sea shanty she knew well. The fast-paced fiddle was replaced by a string quartet, the percussion thumped on full barrels of rum turned into a lively concerto played by a piano. Only the accordion remained, even if the player was far more down to earth than the one from her crew who pranced across her ship's deck.

"I haven't danced with you in ages," she abruptly whispered to Sam. Her hooves tapped along to the beat, clicking against the checkered tiles of the ballroom.

"Well, there's only one thing we can do to fix that, isn't there?" Sam bowed to her, his right hand over his heart. "May I have this dance?"

Her time in the SMP had taught her a great many things, the most surprising of which was ballroom dancing. Between the frequent Greater SMP balls back in the day and the Red Banquet, she had mastered a great many steps and figures. All of that had since been partially erased thanks to the lack of royal parties present on the high seas. She could only just about recall the box-step of the waltz and the first few figures of the Austrian ländler, but it was enough to still have a good time.

She started to sweetly sing the lyrics, adapting them to the orchestral remix of the tempo. Sam joined in, just as quietly. His murmurs rumbled like rolling storm clouds.

The exotic birds of the royal aerie would probably be able to do a better job than them with their shrill but heavenly cries, but they would certainly be far from capturing the same joy and fun that the dancers did.

Their singing was hushed, as if the true meaning of the song was a secret shared only between them both.

It brought them even closer to one another. Their waltz was spent forehead to forehead, floating in a happy little bubble away from the world.

"I've missed this," Puffy confessed, careful not to break the paper thin walls of their little haven. "I didn't think I would, but I do. I wish I had attended more balls than I did."

"I couldn't exactly blame you. The Red Banquet didn't give them all the best reputation afterwards."

"I'm still glad it happened; otherwise, the Egg would still be here, and I wouldn't have had the courage to tell you my feelings."

"*Tell* me?" Sam laughed. "I remember you angrily trying to shut me up."

"Hm, I think we're remembering that night differently," she mused with a smile.

"I confessed openly about three or four different times and you ignored most of them."

"Can you blame me? Everything was chaotic."

"I'll give you that. It was chaos, so much so that your fury made you kiss me."

She folded. "Alright, maybe I was a *little* annoyed... Just a little, though."

"Of course." He matched her teasing smirk from a few hours ago. "Just a little."

He said it in a tone that told her he didn't believe a word of what he was saying—and found it hilariously funny. She didn't want to argue with him, not because of any threat of breaking their partnership but rather a stubborn desire to not feed into his rising ego and give him the satisfaction of doing so. She had knocked it down a few pegs that afternoon, and she planned to keep it that way a little while longer.

They continued to step in time to the shanty, but Puffy soon realized that Sam's gaze was wavering. He'd glance off to the surrounding crowds from time to time and she followed his line of sight.

Queen Sylvee stood on the sidelines, the stillness and quiet of her figure oddly insistent and expecting. What could have merely been seen by others as a monarch overlooking her own party—as was absolutely in her right—sparked something in her brother. Their rhythm and hold began to slip.

Puffy tried to catch his eyes. "What's up?"

"My sister wants to talk to me."

Puffy had no idea why that sentence made her shiver as much as it did. Neither of them said anything more about it until the song finished.

Sam kissed her hand. "I'm sorry, I'll be back in a bit."

He hurried off, but Puffy wasn't as alone as she thought she would be. The next dance started off as a group one before splitting off into randomized couples. Puffy found herself in the hold of someone she didn't know all too well, but Sam had talked about and praised often enough for her to consider him a friend.

"This is a weird first introduction," Boomer croaked, smiling.

"It kind of is, yeah."

"Sam talks about you a lot."

"Likewise," she replied, matching his amiability. "He has nothing but good things to say about you."

"Great, that's cool." They eased into the rhythm a little more now the initial awkwardness had dissipated. "How's your stay been?"

He certainly didn't talk like one of a queen's closest advisors. There were no flourished turns of phrase, no haughty tone of superiority, and no treating her like a source of adventure stories or a blood-sucking parasite latched to anyone's side. He treated her as a person.

That was certainly a welcome change.

"Surprisingly good, honestly," she replied with a shrug. "I wasn't sure at first, but Sam was right; I just needed to give this place a bit of a chance."

"I'm surprised too. You seem like a wonderful person, which is more than I can say for the courtiers."

"You can't be loved by everyone, especially when your first introduction is in chains and accused of being a pirate. I've been a bit more worried about the guards."

"Oh, don't worry about Corpse. I think he secretly hates everyone."

That made her laugh loudly, attracting a few sidelong glances. She didn't care. Boomer laughed along with her.

"I guess you're probably right," she sighed, composing herself again.

"He's always that hostile to newcomers he doesn't trust. I only managed to shake him off after six months of him threatening to stab me for leaving slimy handprints everywhere."

Puffy was relieved to see he was wearing gloves.

"The only person I do think he genuinely cares for is the queen," Boomer continued. "All his nastiness is in order to protect her, just like how she protects him. It's a mutual agreement."

A feared warrior striking up a reciprocal bargain and a friendship with a high-ranking ruler. That was a familiar story indeed.

Technoblade would have found it justified.

Boomer looked down. "It won't last, though. Corpse can only do so much for her, and he knows it. That's why he's so anxious about tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know?"

"Know what?"

Puffy and Boomer came to a standstill. The song ended and the dancers departed, mulled around and got in their places for the next.

She took a step away from his hold, her expression pinched as she tried to comprehend what he meant.

His own had darkened considerably, and he looked at her with a saddened stare. It was the first she had seen in ages, and it violently took her aback.

"Her Majesty is going to name her brother the Crown Prince, tonight."

Chapter Twenty: Land And Sea

"I'm dying."

Sam had expected her to say a great many things. This was certainly not one of them.

He stared out of the window for a few agonizingly long seconds, then feigned looking back and snapping back to reality.

"What?" He shook his head and shifted against the cushions of the window seat. They had never felt more painfully uncomfortable and scratchy against his back. "I wasn't listening."

He had heard every syllable. They were still ringing inside his head, knocking at his skull. His head grew heavy, dizzy even.

He wanted to hear her say it again, to make sure he wasn't going crazy.

"I'm dying, Sam."

His mouth was dry. "How? Of what?"

Sylvee took his hand and brought it to her chest. Something inside her pulsed and writhed against his fingers, a hive or colony trying to break free and tear through her flesh.

"The Blue Plague was eradicated, for the most part, but not inside me. The sculk spores managed to settle in my lungs. It's been eating me alive ever since."

The longer he kept his fingers there, the more it began to dawn on him.

He yanked his hand away. "Have you tried—"

"The royal physicians have tried *everything*, Sam. There's nothing more to be done. I'm dying, and I accepted it long ago."

His laugh was forced and utterly disbelieving. "You're speaking like you don't have any lives left."

"I don't."

She rolled up her sleeve, exposing the same line of tattooed hearts on her forearm that he had. Two were gone, and the bottom half of the third was slowly being swallowed up by a turquoise blue rash.

"If I had any less than three, I would have been gone months ago. I would have never got to see you again. I got to know you were alive, even when we all were told you had died." She let out a small, breathy laugh. "It's ironic, isn't it? Now we're going to switch places."

"Shut up."

"Sam—"

"Shut up!" He clapped his hands to his ears and drowned her out. "I swear to the gods, you're not going to die! You're lying, politicians always do..."

His sister was dying.

His clasped hands came to press against the back of his neck, pushing his head down. Everything fell with it. His breath shook with dry tears of fury that never made their way out properly.

She couldn't.

She *couldn't*...

He wanted to roughly shove her hand away when it came to rest on his back. The mere thought of hurting her even more stopped him, the horror of it all freezing him to his core. He couldn't speak. He couldn't scream. He couldn't even think.

His blazing gaze and shuddering breaths must have been enough to tell her to back off, as she did soon after.

"I have one last wish."

He perked up, "Anything."

Anything to prolong her life, to keep her with him.

"I want you to take the throne when I'm gone."

The world spun before his eyes, blurred at the edges. It all came crashing down upon his head like shards of a broken glass. It hurt him just as much.

"You're... you're joking. This is a joke, it has to be..."

Her sweet, pale gaze was anything but. It was desperate. "I am completely serious. I want to name you my heir tonight, if you'll take the title."

"Why me?"

"I will trust no one else with the crown itself. All my advisors agree with me."

"Even Corpse?"

"Especially Corpse."

"Sylvee, you and your cabinet barely know me. I'm not who I was back then, and I've changed, and—"

"Your arrival in the South feels like a blessing from the gods, and a sign. I've thought about it ever since I saw you again. My army doesn't just go arresting random civilians. There had to be a reason, some sort of divine intervention that made them do that, and there was. Why do you think Corpse respects you the way he does? Why did I bring you into that first cabinet meeting?"

With every sentence, he found himself slinking further and further away from her.

"Sam, you told me so yourself: you're a redstone genius, you ruled the Badlands, you built Pandora's Vault, you even solved the South's economic crash on your first day here. What makes you think you're not worthy to be my successor?"

His mind went blank.

She clawed at his arm with an abrupt and desperate show of strength. "Sam, please," she begged, "do this for me. It's my last wish in this world. Things aren't going as well as I hoped with the West, it'll take a while for things to get back to normal in the South following my death, and I need to know my people are safe. There's no one else I can count on completely but you. Promise me you'll at least consider it."

"I..."

She reached a frail hand out towards him, urging him back to her, her only hope.

He would do anything for her. Anything except what she was asking him to.

He scrambled to his feet. "I can't, I'm sorry."

He ran.

Sam put as much distance between the ballroom, the queen and himself as he could. He bolted down the corridors, finally understanding why some found them so terrifying in the dark.

Painted eyes of monarchs and nobles from dynasties and dynasties ago glared down at him as he passed, their pursed lips twisting into shadowy sneers. Bony fingers dripping with colourful brush strokes threatened to claw their way out of their frames and grab him, pull them up to their paper faces and scream in his ears, mock him for refusing to join their ranks, jeer at him about Queen Sylvee's fate and sow seeds of guilt inside him.

He wouldn't let them sprout, pushing down everything with difficulty. They writhed in his stomach, exactly like the sculk—whatever that was exactly—did inside his dear, darling sister.

In his panic, he tripped around a corner and crashed into a wall. The portrait above him wobbled and when he pulled back, Sylvee's eyes stared down. They were serene, but disappointed. They wanted answers he couldn't give, silently screaming for help from the only one she thought she could trust.

He pushed himself well away and resumed his frantic race away from—what exactly?

Death?

The harrowing prospect of bearing a crown?

He didn't know.

In the silver moonlight outside, he felt like he was drowning. The gardens were empty; it seemed like even the patrols had better things to do than watch the Northern side of the palace.

He collapsed upon a bench beside an ivy-covered wall, overlooked by a stone gargoyle on the orangery roof and the frightened eyes of a deer caught in Artemis' frozen grasp.

His heart crashed against his ribcage again and again. It hurt him even more with every shove.

He sat there, blinded to the world around him, for what felt like hours, days, weeks even. Sylvee could have been dead by then, and he would have failed her—as he had before and as he would again.

He was destined to do nothing but fail in every regard, at every turn, to anyone who ever put so much as a crumb of trust in him. He'd always end up leaving them, or they'd die on his watch.

There was only one person who he hadn't failed completely yet. She came to join him soon afterwards.

She called his name, "Sam?"

He raised his head, "Puffy."

"Boomer told me everything."

He looked away and down. He clasped his hands together and brought them up to his face. His knuckles turned white. Gunpowder clogged the air, rendering them both unable to speak.

Puffy could do nothing but sit down next to him, quiet and discreet. The tulle of her skirts brushed his leg, but neither of them reacted to it. She had so many words and touches of loving comfort that she could have given him. However, she didn't dare. Deep down, she knew it was futile. It would amount to nothing.

Her eyes landed on a potted tree and the ripe orange baubles weighing down its branches. She picked one and remembering Tina's words, offered a slice to Sam. He didn't even acknowledge it. She wasn't hungry either, and left the peeled mandarin on the ground to rot away with the elements.

"I don't want her to leave," Sam whispered all of a sudden. His voice was so small, so frail. "I love her so much, she's the only bit of my family I have left... Did you know she can sing? When I played the piano, she'd sing with me, and she sounded absolutely beautiful. She was like a nightingale or a greenfinch; she sang like them, and she wanted to be free, just like them. She told our parents that, and as a consolation prize they gave her a lark in a cage. It was a feisty little thing, pecking anyone who came near. She wasn't allowed to let it out. I think it was some sort of a warning to her: struggle against the system and it'll cage you further. I wanted to prove them all wrong, for her. I should have taken her with me when I left. I could have given her a better life. She was the hardest thing I had to leave behind. She's my little sister, and I can't lose her."

He caught his breath with a deep, shaky inhale. He closed his mouth, seemingly dazed out of his mind, and fell quiet again.

Puffy took a chance and tentatively put a hand on his lower back. She rubbed the length of his spine.

It got her no reaction. She had to check if he was breathing at all.

Puffy had known Sylvee for less than a week, but the news that came out of Boomer's mouth shook her unlike any other.

The Queen's been sick for a while, and she's not going to hold on for much longer, he had told her.

Puffy's first thoughts had, of course, been for Sam. She had rushed to find him as soon as she could, frantically asking anyone and everyone if they had seen him. They must have all taken her for mad. It was maid who nervously pointed her to the gardens after carrying more bottles of champagne in from the kitchens.

Now she was sitting beside him in silence, unable to do anything but just be there. It felt like very little to her, but it might have been just enough for him.

"She wants me to take the throne when she..." He trailed off.

Puffy nodded solemnly. "Yeah, I heard that too."

"I told her I wouldn't—"

Puffy hoped dearly that there would be another possible heir. The South was a beautiful and friendly place, and she prayed that the crown would stay secure. There was no telling what would happen if Corpse or any of the power hungry nobles in the court staged a coup. Everything could burn. Innocents could die. The South could fall into shambles. She had known many a nation that had met the same fate before.

"—but I'm reconsidering."

She turned to him. "What?" She laughed. "You're joking, right?"

Her heart stopped when he didn't say anything in return.

Sam wasn't looking at her, but out at the world in front of them. The gardens, the lake, the mountains, all only small bits of the vast kingdom of the South.

His kingdom.

No.

His sister's kingdom. Someone else's kingdom in the future.

Not his.

It *wouldn't* be his.

"She said I'm the only one she trusts with the crown," he murmured. "There's no one else eligible for it, either. I'm her last hope. I'm the South's last hope. We've heard those words before, right? On the night of the Red Banquet, Karl said I was the Hope of Pandora's Vault that had come back from the dead to save them all. History repeats itself in the strangest ways."

The prospect of the kingdom burning wasn't as terrifying anymore. Puffy's mind was reeling, horrified by something else entirely. Her hands were shaking, and she clasped them together, wringing them to a standstill.

"You have to tell her that you can't," she told him. "We leave in two days."

They still had to pack, to fix their ship, to chart their next route and do extensive research on their next destinations. Not to mention, they could do with more food, fresh water and their weapons sharpened—

Sam shattered in front of her very eyes.

"I can't keep doing this," he cried out suddenly, "I can't keep running away from these things, I just can't! First, my own family. Then, the SMP. A third time will damn me forever."

"You have no obligations here!" She grabbed his hands and squeezed them. "You've been here for a week, a *week*! You don't know this place, you don't know these people. You don't owe them anything."

He finally crossed her gaze, and it was done with eyes of stern, unbreakable stone. "My sister grieved me for twenty years, Puffy, and I did nothing about it. I could have saved her, and I didn't do anything. I owe her *everything*."

Again, he looked out across the land. He even stood up, taking Puffy with him in his wake. She refused to let go of him, or else she'd lose him. She had to hold on whatever the cost may be.

"That day in the cabinet meeting, I realized that I hadn't lost anything from my Badlands days."

As he spoke, she watched as his eyes glazed over, sparkling with a sudden burst of excitement—an emotion she definitely had not thought she'd see on his face that night.

I saved this place, and they all praised me for it. They keep calling me back, asking for advice—even following what I said. First was the redstone, but now they're even discussing the possibility of opening an academy, of branching out trade and bettering the living conditions of the people. I know I can rule, and I can do some good here, a lot of good. I don't want a throne or a crown, both mean nothing to me. I just want to help the South like I helped the SMP. Staying here will let me do that on an unbelievable scale, and... There's something about this place. It's like I'm meant to be here."

Bitter water began to build up inside her, churning and crashing against her ribs. She tried to push it down, in vain.

Finally, she managed to ask the question she hadn't dared to until then.

"What about me?" She swallowed down the cannonball in her throat. "Do you still love me?"

"Madly," he replied without missing a beat. He kissed the back of her hand. "More than life itself."

He still wasn't looking at her, but at the dark chiseled silhouettes of the mountains. She could practically hear his brain whirring with plans and blueprints and whatever else went on in there without her knowing.

She tried to catch his attention. "Then why are you staying?"

Sam didn't reply. The crack in Puffy's chest became a crevice.

She tried again, "Sam?"

He hung his head.

"Sam."

"|—"

"Then why are you staying?"

"It's not what you—"

"*Why* are you staying, Sam?"

"Because I need to ground myself." His words were assertive, but his wandering gaze definitely was not. "I don't like who I've become on the sea."

He looked down at his hands. His fingers were calloused, even more so than they used to be. Perpetual ridges from salt water wrinkled the tips of his fingers and splinters from the wheel, handrails and the deck left far more scars than they should have. There was no redstone dust anymore, and all the old injuries from the SMP had been wiped away.

But he wasn't the only one: they both had changed. One of them had just been hiding what he really felt from the other.

"I've lost a lot of what I used to have. I risked my last life just to hear a siren sing—the old me would have never done that. You even tried to talk me out of it, and I didn't listen to you. Back then, I wouldn't have ignored you, I would have sat down and thought instead of being a reckless idiot! And it's not just about the stupid risks I take! The sea has been trying to kill me since day one, and just yesterday, I was trying to explain a redstone blueprint to a duchess, and I realized that I didn't know what I was saying anymore. Everything sounded strange and foreign to me, and I... I can't do this anymore. I'm changing, I'm this close to drowning, and I'm scared of what will be next. For all I know, I could start to lose my memories. I'd forget my past, the Vault, Phil, Techno, Tubbo, Tommy... I don't want to fall too far, before it's too late."

"You won't forget your memories, that's impossible—"

"You don't know that. No one knows that! I just need to stop running and stop pretending to be something I'm not. I'm not a sailor, and I never will be."

"You always told me you were never a ruler either."

"As time went on, I realized that was the biggest lie I never even knew I was telling. Deep down, no matter how much I try to deny it, I know that I was always destined for something like this. I run and hide but Fate always catches up. I was born into power, and I can't keep pretending I'm not. But I need help. I can't go through this alone, I just can't..."

Her whole body went cold, as did her voice. Her question, heavy with dread, was icy. "What do you mean?"

He finally looked at her properly. The green and black intensity in his own frightened, pleading eyes scared her so much that she tensed up entirely. The desperation was one she had never seen in him before.

"I don't want to leave you," he blurted out, "and I'm begging you to stay with me. Please..."

His only hope.

The lightning cracked, and she did the unthinkable: she pulled away.

"Puffy?"

"No." Her hand slipped from his. She took a few steps back. Her whole body was shaking. "I can't..."

"You can't? What do you mean, you *can't*?"

Something continued to tug at her dress, her mind and her body. A strong current pulled her well away from Sam, and try as she might it became harder and harder to fight it.

"You said you wanted to travel again, you wanted to stay by my side, you..." Everything hurt. Every word and inhale was a dagger to her heart. Heavy betrayal clogged her throat. "You said so many things, and now you're throwing it all away for what?"

"A good life we could live together. So many would be so thankful if we both stayed, and we could help people. We could protect the South just like we protected the SMP!"

"We're already protecting people. We're the Guardians, remember? We keep the seas safe..."

"I know, but we can't keep doing it forever. The things we're fighting against are getting bolder and smarter, and we're not getting any younger. There will be a time where we won't be able to do any more there. We might compromise something important for, what, stubborn pride? Wishful thinking that we're immortal and untouchable? Who will fish our corpses out of the water when we die? How many ones who died needlessly would we need to fish out ourselves? Maybe it's time we settle, not just for our sake, but for Michelle's. We have a kind and beautiful daughter, darling, and she deserves the best. We can give her a good life here. She could have anything she wants."

Puffy stepped away again when he tried to reach out to her. "She already has a life, we already have a life together! Why should that change?"

"It's dangerous!"

"Elaborate."

"Fighting against seasoned pirates, for one. That's a death sentence for anyone."

"She's good at it," Puffy pointed out proudly.

"She's *ten*, Puffy," Sam reminded her softly. "That's no life for a child. You of all people should know that."

She was aghast. "Are you blaming what happened to Tommy on me?"

"What—? No, of course not! Gods, why would I—"

"Because *I* was not the one who locked him down in a strange, unfamiliar place to him for his own protection. That was on *you*, and you alone, and you are not going to do the same thing to Michelle!"

She had touched a nerve. She hadn't wanted to. The claims and accusations that poured out of her were bitter and were definitely not her own. They tasted like salt water.

Sam didn't seem to notice the difference. He raised his head higher and grit his teeth. A hiss rumbled in his chest, felt and heard by her so distinctly that it scared her. Loud thunder rumbled and growled.

"You're the one trying to pull me back into a life I only got into because of you," he muttered.

"I never asked you to come with me," she retorted.

"So you would have preferred if I just stayed behind in the SMP?"

"Yes, maybe I would have!"

There was a breath, and they both froze. Puffy's shout, full of anger and desperation, still hung around them like heavy smog, suffocating them both.

Maybe things would have been easier if they had parted ways when the ocean had told them to.

Maybe it was giving them a second chance to do it right.

Maybe it was forcing them too.

"Well, you won't have to worry about that this time around," Sam bit out. He dug the heels of his boots into the gravel of the palace gardens. His palace, his gardens. "I'm staying here."

"Good," she spat out just as fiercely, matching his own attitude, "you finally built up the courage to think for yourself instead of following me around like a wet dog."

Every word was poison to her, and undoubtedly to him as well. She would have taken it all back immediately if the ocean's fury wasn't painfully swirling inside of her. She couldn't control it anymore.

"A wet dog, huh? Well go ahead, Captain Puffy." He stepped even further back. "You're free now."

"*Fine*," she spat. "Stay here, Your Highness; play the prince you were always born to be. Nothing's stopping you anymore either."

"*Fine!*"

Sam's tone was harsh, but his eyes certainly were not—or maybe they were, softened only by the light of an empathetic moon beam and nothing else. She didn't have the time to look properly. He turned on his heels and stormed off.

The typhoon abruptly froze and crashed down into the pits of her being. Her knees trembled.

Just like that, it was over.

Just like that, Sam was gone.

She had lost him.

There was no way to understand how exactly it happened. Her mind was smudged by blurred memories of the last few minutes, so much salt leaking out of so much heartbreak.

The day had started with a delicious victory unlike any other, and had ended with a loss she hadn't even seen coming. Neither of them had.

The clock struck three in the morning, and upon the chime a part of Puffy died. The night had never felt so difficult to walk through, so lonely and heavy on her senses.

She didn't call for help.

There was only one thing she could always count on.

She ran down to the sea.

Although the harbour took up the main seafront of the city, a number of the natural beaches weren't far away. There was a path from the gardens down to the bay that took a shortcut through the pine forests. Puffy had found it a while back, but hadn't felt the need to use it, until now.

The further she ran, the sandier the path became and the more her hooves sank into it. The pines engulfed her figure, matchstick-like trunks creating stripes of shadow against her skin and dress. She tipped over rocks and twisting trunks across the path, snagging the fabric and tearing at the stitching. A patch of spiky, rough holly scraped against her ankles when she veered off accidentally, and when she tried to catch herself on a pine trunk a broken branch sliced across her forearm.

She barely sensed any of it, because there at the end of the treeline, the ocean rolled and howled her name. The pine forest gave away sand dunes, stretching out like a carpet of damp silk down to the waving line of silver. The midnight wind rustled the clumps of seaweed and clumps of seaweed and blew stray, sparkling grains over the pebbles and seashells. Puffy took a deep breath and crossed the wet desert, leaving behind a trail of footsteps she had no desire to follow back to the castle.

Three bright stars in a perfectly diagonal formation blinked back, bright and beautiful.

One night, back in the SMP, Technoblade had told her the myth of Orion: a bloody Greek story of a man who simultaneously fled and befriended the gods only to be stung by a scorpion and die a painful death. Zeus immortalized him in the stars as a constellation, his belt being the only part people really knew it for.

A more common appellation Puffy had heard was Santiago, or Saint-Jacques. It was the name that weaved its way around harbor towns and sailor-ridden taverns. It was apparently the one the Kingdom of the South was more familiar with as well.

Santiago was a traveller, a pilgrim, a saint whose stars guided journeys from start to finish, gave pilgrims hope and steered ships down the right currents. When the world below did nothing but separate and confuse time and time again, one glance up to the night sky would set things back on track. The Great Apostle of the Firmament was always a lost soul's saving grace in dire need.

The sea-dwellers worshiped it as their god, often more so than they did Poseidon or the mermaids in the lagoons. Where the great Neptune was easily angered, Santiago was benevolent. There was a reason they had named some of the biggest, most beautiful shells on the ocean floor after him.

However, when it came to matters of the heart, Saint-Jacques could only stare down in sorrowful silence. Even the miracles of the stars could only go so far down on the Overworld's plain.

One end of the belt of stars pointed to the dark horizon, to lands and adventures far beyond the beach, far away from where she was now. The other pointed back to the palace, and the new life offered to her there. It didn't force her into a decision; it gave her a choice.

Puffy dropped to the ground. It was still a little warm from the day's heat, but had been quickly cooling down since. She had to dig her nails underneath the crust to touch the comforting remains of the sun. The soft sand closed in around her hand, gently trying to latch on to her and pull her inland. It was where the warmth was.

A blast of bitter cold splashed against her legs, and the ocean once more dragged her back to itself. It always did.

Captain Puffy was born beside it, and she heard its crashing waves before she heard her own mother's voice. She learned to walk by its side and to run in its shallows. As time went on, everything slowly started revolving around the ocean, even her appearance.

Her mother and father both doted on their little lamb to borderline obsession, comparing her curls to the undulating waves and her eyes to the sparkling depths. Everyone did. Compliments and comparisons were always made to the sea, its waters, the fish, the pearls, the treasures, the shells—she was defined by it.

When a problem reared its head, she'd run back to it.

When her life steadied, she always ended up running back to it, too.

It kept her afloat, and drowned others in it with no mercy. It had even drowned her. In hindsight, that freak incident felt more like a threat, a warning. Washing up on the SMP had shown her the horrors that plagued the land, and when she came out the other end it snatched her right back into its arms.

It held a titan's grip on every ounce of her being, slimy chains around her wrists and ankles. It yanked her back when she came too close to embracing the thought of something new, enticed her in her sorrow, and bubbled inside her as a reminder of its presence deep within her.

She had always been the ocean's.

She had never truly been anything else.

She had never asked for any of it.

The realization began to dawn on her. She gazed out across the choppy waters. Silver foam caressed her, beckoning an inviting finger and making a move to once again snag her broken heart for itself.

This time, she resisted.

"It's always been you," she breathed, her chest tight. "You're the one responsible for breaking up my lives."

The only consistent thing was also the main disruptor. She shuffled backwards. The tide crept closer in retaliation. The sand held her up, kept her safe. For the first time, she properly appreciated it.

The fury bubbled again inside her stomach and it now suddenly felt like something else entirely. No longer a beautiful part of who she was and who she had always been, it lashed at her insides with salty claws and sharp stabs, an eldritch creature fledging into its true form and throwing a fit.

The waves in front of her eyes were no better. They rolled in larger than before, and crashed harder on top of her. She was soaked in a matter of minutes and started to accidentally swallow entire mouthfuls. She choked, scrambling even further back and coughing out bitter drops.

"You're the one dragging me everywhere without a care, tearing everything I knew away."

First, her parents and siblings. Then, Schlatt. The irresistible call had then persuaded her leaving baby Tubbo to the care of a complete stranger was a good idea, followed by abandoning the SMP when her drive to do good there flaked just a little. Now it was reaching its wet fingers in again through the crevices in her heart, enticing her to raise the anchor and leave once more.

After all, what was one more escape in the grand scheme of things? She had done it countless times before; one more wouldn't hurt the tally.

All of it made her violently sick—seasick, in fact. Sick of the waves, for the first time in her entire life. It was unheard of, and it had never felt so real.

Puffy had heard of a superstition—by the ramblings of her family, friends, strangers, books, who knows?—from a long time ago. It claimed that the greatest sailors to ever sail the seas didn't do so by luck. Sinbad and Odysseus, Blackbeard and Red Rackham, Columbus and Magellan were among those who had shaped the oceans and knew better than anyone what it meant to have the wind billowing in your sails. They all had one thing in common, the reason why they became as great as they were; the sea had chosen them.

Rather, the sea had possessed them.

They had no choice but to carve themselves a legacy upon its waving canvas. They had been chained to it the very same way Puffy had been. The only difference was that the Captain had finally found the key.

"You cursed me."

Her vision swirled in protest. A tempest of azure shocked her senses.

Beautiful eyes as bright and blue as the ocean.

She finally understood why.

Sam had made a point the day she had almost left the SMP alone: *you always belonged to the sea.*

She didn't belong *to* anything or anyone, she belonged *with* them. It was sometimes hard to note the difference.

She knew, now.

And she was going to put an end to it.

"You are not going to take anything away from me, never again. That's it. All my life, you made me think that the only place I belonged was in the brine, that nothing could ever amount to what you could give me, that no one could ever love me or want me the way you made me believe you did. I know better, now. My family—on land—loves me. My daughter *loves* me. Sam *loves* me. They *love* me, and that is worth everything. I'm not going to risk losing them again. I know what I want, now."

It was time to get it back before it was too late. For all she knew, it already was.

She never gave the sea a proper goodbye. She didn't have the heart, and she knew they wouldn't be apart completely. It would still be there, chiming and roaring outside her window—but now she would sleep soundly through its tantrums and piercing cries for her.

Captain Puffy, dropping her title in the sand to be swallowed by the waves where her name had always been, rushed back the way she came.

Santiago smiled.

She had never realized how well she had managed to map out the twisting garden avenues and palace corridors until she found herself darting through them with ease. Servants barely spared an eye for her, too busy extinguishing the candles in the brackets fixed to the walls. The ballroom was now deserted, and the court had retired for the night. There was no more music, no more laughter.

No more distractions, although it still seemed like the end of the night had been a good one for many. Bottles and smashed celebratory glasses littered the polished floor underneath her hooves. Certain guest rooms still had their lights on as she passed by; it wasn't a surprise that high-class debauchery would go on well into the early hours of the morning.

Her heart jumped at the thought that Sam could be a part of them. The notion was dissolved with a horrified argument against herself, but it was there nonetheless.

It would have been well too late by then. The gods and Fate, however, seemed to have other plans.

Puffy finally found him part way up the grand staircase, hand holding on to the bannister like his life depended on it. Out of everyone's sight, he looked frail, as if a gust of strong wind could knock him over with ease, or as if he'd shatter like the glass littering the ground. He probably already had.

"Sam!"

"Puffy?"

She stopped, and so did he. They stared at one another, a good distance apart. Puffy didn't dare to take a step closer. She couldn't read him.

Was that look a gentle one, a guilty one, or simply—and worst of all—indifferent?

Had they both gone from lovers to strangers so quickly? Had any of it been as powerful as she had thought it had been be? Was every part of them so superficial that it was cleaned away like a fine layer of dust?

Were the true colours finally showing themselves after years of what had been a perfect, adoring romance?

Nothing was said for a long time.

Sam's eyes travelled down, widening at her torn dress, her hem wet and stiff with salt. A worryingly large cut bled on her forearm, and she winced when he saw it himself. Worry immediately overcame everything else.

"What happened, are you okay? Who did this to you? Was it Corpse? I'll kill him."

He still loved her.

She ran up the steps and into his arms, burying her face into his chest. "I thought I lost you, I thought you hated me, I..."

A hand came to rest on the back of her head, pulling her closer. He seemed almost scared to touch her, to accidentally chain her up and keep her with him against her will. In that gentle hesitation, she felt every single inch of his burning apology, and in her tight embrace she gave every part of her own.

"I could never hate you," he whispered, "but I'll never understand how you could ever love me..."

"Neither can I."

She laughed, burying her face into his shoulder. It sounded like a tasteless joke. It was a tasteless joke. She didn't retract it. She didn't know what she was saying anymore, but she knew that it was her own thoughts and feelings.

She wasn't a puppet anymore.

"All I know is I do, and I'm not leaving you. I'm staying."

"Even if—"

"I don't care if you're a king or not, I love you, and I'm staying."

"But the ocean—"

"Has let me go. You're right, I'm free. I can do whatever I want, live where I want to live, love who I want to love with no more compromises. The sea made me leave my family behind three times already, and I'd be damned if it did so again."

Always and forever.

Puffy finally knew what that really meant.

She pressed her forehead to Sam's.

"I'd rather lose all the treasure in the world, every single splinter of my ship and every scrap of ancient maps and books than you and Michelle. I've put my hoof down, finally. I've chosen what really matters to me." She traced his face with her palms. "You matter to me more than anything, my love, my thunder."

Neither of them wanted any form of a verbal apology. All they craved was reassurance, truth, beauty, freedom, and proof of love.

Sam gave his eagerly. He pressed chaste kisses all over her face through streams of tears like a mantra, a promise and a deeply ingrained vow.

Puffy kept her grip tight, an iron fist refusing to let go. She pressed as close to him as she could. She couldn't bear to part from him, not for a single inch.

Neither of them mentioned the royal golden coronet newly adorning his brow.

Sapnap woke up in a cold sweat, and the inherent need to pee. Desperately. Drinking copious glasses of champagne never did anyone any favours.

He tried to slip off undetected, which was harder than it seemed. He accidentally shuffled too far to the side too quickly, and Niki's head fell off his stomach to the earth below.

It was enough to groggily wake her up.

"What in the world are you doing?" she mumbled, grumpy.

"Peeing."

"Not on us, I hope."

"Of course not, I'm going into the forest."

"Get some more firewood while you're there, 's getting cold."

He rolled his eyes, "Yes, Your Majesty..."

Niki let out a sleepy hum and rolled over again, cuddling up to Ranboo's fluffy tail and drifting back off to sleep.

Sapnap waited until her breathing slowed once again before daring to make another move. With him gone, the summer night was frigid and his three friends collectively shivered. Before he did anything else, he built up another, smaller hearth with debris from the bonfire and lit it. It crackled and spat softly, pleasantly, and he loaded it with more twigs.

Once he had relieved himself behind a tree—awkwardly eyeing the owl on the branch above him who insisted on making intense eye contact—he decided to go log hunting. A couple more would keep the blaze going until morning properly broke. Out in the clearing, he could see the sky grow lighter behind the line of wooded hills bordering his kingdom.

He ducked into the trees' shadows and built up his stash, using his own flaming glow to light his way. His senses eventually took him to a deep pond, fed by a thin stream guzzling and gurgling across the woodland landscape.

Sapnap, admittedly, hadn't ventured this far into the Kinoko forest before. Karl had taken him to this particular water hole only once, one warm and sunny February day ages and ages ago, a day now almost completely forgotten and overshadowed by the bloody events that had followed it. In the time of the last war, they had both needed a distraction, and for some reason his boyfriend-at-the-time's first thought while dating a fireborn had been to swim. Even coated with Water Resistance and drunk on Water Breathing potions, Sapnap hadn't found the courage to dip so much as his pinky toe, and had spent the day on the dry land, simply watching as Karl discovered the world around him through his hands. He had never seen a blind man's eyes so alive.

That same day, by that same pond, Sapnap had finally proposed to his longtime love.

It had felt like a lifetime or two ago now.

He unloaded the logs and sat down on that exact same spot, in the exact same position, his mind reeling through the exact same events.

He was getting married in the morning. A few more hours, that was all the time he had left. He wished it was less. He couldn't contain his bubbling excitement any longer.

A light danced through the trees in front of him, and he paused to watch with a dreamy smile. Fireflies were his first thought, before he realized how big they were for those little insects, and how fiery too.

And how the light was advancing towards him. Footsteps broke up the nighttime silence of the undergrowth.

Sapnap regained his senses enough to raise his head and stand up.

"Hello?"

The hapless lovebird brooding over his happy future had been momentarily overcome by the serious, competent general Kinoko Kingdom praised him for.

The light stopped at the edge of the shadows, close enough to be heard but not to be seen. "Hello," they replied.

Even squinting, Sapnap couldn't make them out. "Who are you, what do you want? Are you in danger?"

"No danger, I was looking for someone."

"Who?"

"The selfish bastard who betrayed me, and I've found him."

Sapnap had left any semblance of a weapon back with his friends, but he still had his fire. He cautiously slipped off his gloves. Sparks began to tingle at the end of his fingers.

"Who are you?" he asked again, the voice growing more and more hauntingly familiar to his ears.

"Take another look."

The owner of the voice stepped out into the light, just on the opposite side of the pond. Fire licked up the length of his forearms like serpent tongues, and a crimson eye tracked his every move with a predatory glare. The other, almost hidden entirely by the shadows, burned with a dull glint, softer than the other.

Hurt.

Betrayed, even.

Something in Sapnap's mind jumped-started after decades of dormancy. The recollection of a night that had always seemed foreign and dreamlike to him came back in full, aggressive force, pelting him with scrap after scrap of detailed memories. Now unearthed from the depths of his denial, they were irrefutable proof that it had all been real. Every single second of it.

"Eryn," he breathed out. "My gods, is that really you?"

"In the flesh, no thanks to you."

"I thought they killed you."

"You would have liked that, wouldn't you?"

The young fireborn leapt over the water in an impressive jump that left Sapnap speechless.

"Strong enough for you, yet?" Eryn snarled. "Worth taking along this time—? Oh wait, you can't, can you? You've been free for years! You don't need me anymore. I'm just a nightmare you can cast aside as you please."

Sapnap did something he had never done before. He backed away, defensive. "That was an accident," he tried to argue, "you know it was. I thought there was no other way—"

"So you decided to save your own skin, after all I did to help you?" His laugh was bitter, chilling—crazed, even, maddened by thoughts of a past they both severely seemed to regret. "You fucking *prick*!"

"I was a kid back then. I didn't know what to do. I panicked, and I'm sorry."

"Do you think a rushed apology makes up for years' worth of beatings? Torture? The death of innocent people when I finally fled myself?"

Sapnap couldn't answer. His attention was glued to the obsidian dagger clutched in the fireborn's hand. Eryn rolled the handle in his palm, his grip squeezing it routinely. His vengeful fire only grew.

"It doesn't, but this definitely will."

Sapnap couldn't answer, couldn't apologize again, couldn't make things right. He wasn't even given the chance.

The skulk greedily lapped up the blood that soaked the forest floor.

Chapter Twenty-One: Lava-Cast

Most of Ranboo's dreams that night were happy ones, still riding off the high of love and affection their small group shared.

His mind began to cycle through snippets he all but forgot, and from those frayed strands a magnificent series of pictures formed in his subconscious. Cozy winter nights beside the fire with Tubbo, exhausting but productive sparring sessions with Techo, walks along the beach with Michael, baking with Niki and Velvet, and rushing across the ripe golden barley fields bordering the desert side-by-side with Tommy. There were even snippets of other long gone friends; Philza's black wings swooped in and out of frame, Sam's trident and kind eyes occasionally came to cross his with a smile, and Puffy's gentle curls and fleece pressed softly against him in group hugs and lazy lounging sessions.

However, as his deep sleep dragged on, things began to warp. Happy memories turned bittersweet, and then became sad. Each departed friend faded to a phantom of themselves, a bleak copy of who they once were in life. Even those who still walked beside Ranboo in the present were torn down, scarred, as grey as their resilience and innocence were sucked out of them.

There was an instant where he even saw a face he had almost completely forgotten about.

Dream stared back from the back of an obsidian box, face twisted in confusion.

"Ranboo? What the hell are you doing here?"

Ranboo's thoughts exactly.

He blinked, and the world around him switched again. It burst with flaming colours, many of which he couldn't name even if he tried. They shot and struck and twirled all around him in a spiralling parade dragging him down and down into a dizzy state of absolute insanity.

Everything hurt, and he didn't know if he was awake or asleep anymore.

Fuck, maybe he *did* drink that much.

Abruptly, everything came to a halt. The colours swirled into nothing. All that remained was a void, boundless and bare.

A soaking wet figure, glowing in the abyss, walked towards him. Every footstep squelched in the silence, and the darkness rippled behind him like waving waters.

It was a figure Ranboo knew all too well. Yet, Ranboo had never seen him look so small and shut down, extinguished in his flaming prime.

He narrowed his eyes. "Sapnap?"

The fireborn stopped in his tracks. Blue lips moved fervently. Water dripped down, the landing droplets the loudest things in the world to him. Wide burning eyes—the only part of him that still retained some semblance of fire—tore through his own.

Help me, Sapnap mouthed.

Ranboo woke up with a pounding head and a sore back. The warm lap that had been his mattress for the night was gone, and rocks dug into his spine.

He sat up, looked around. He shook Niki's arm.

"Where's Sapnap?"

She rolled over, squinting against the morning sunrise. Imprints of the ground were left on her cheeks, her hair was a mess. Her livid complexion and flushed cheeks screamed for help, blind to the hangover cures sitting right in front of her face.

"He got up at one point," she said, words slightly slurred.

"When?"

"It was still dark."

"Did you see him come back?"

She shook her head. "Did you?"

Help me.

Ranboo scrambled to his feet, whacking George in the face with his tail as he did. "Something's wrong."

"What?" Niki's hangover seemed to be slipping by the second. Either the potion was working, or the growing panic was simply greater. "What do you mean?"

"What's going on?" George grumbled, rubbing his head and his eyes.

Ranboo jumped to his feet, head still woozy. "He's in danger. We need to find him."

He didn't stop to properly explain the situation to George. Chances were he'd understand soon enough by himself.

He rushed into the treeline, not even bothering to wait for the others. The sudden sensation of the cool summer shadows against his backs so early in the morning made him shiver. He continued nonetheless.

"Sapnap!"

The trees groaned, the bushes rustled and the flowers swayed. No voice replied.

More shouts of his name rang around him as Niki joined in on the hunt.

Ranboo searched behind every boulder, every tree, every thicket and even in any sizable warren he came across. There weren't even any footprints to follow, or other clues to track. The forest couldn't provide any help whatsoever. They were on their own, guided by a hunch and a shared panic.

The sun got higher, and their searches became broader. The only thing keeping Ranboo from getting lost were Niki's repeated shouts.

His own seemed to echo infinitely. No reply or sign of movement from the forest answered him.

He ran from clearing to clearing, keeping his eyes peeled and his wits about him—as much as he could the longer they went with no signs of life.

"Sapnap!"

His throat was rubbed raw. Every second he couldn't find his friend, they became louder and harsher to his ears. The burning blue eyes from his dream shot through him again and again. He couldn't shake them off. He doubled his pace.

"Sapnap!"

He came out into another glade. To his surprise, he finally saw someone. They sat against a tree, fingers drumming on their knee. The tips burned a dull orange. They were too small in build and dark in skin to be Sapnap, but Ranboo slowed down nonetheless.

"Excuse me," he asked, panting, "have you seen a fireborn pass by? Black hair, white bandana, gloves, probably drunk out of his mind, maybe on fire... Has he been through here?"

A crimson eye glanced at him with bare minimum interest.

"In there," the stranger said.

He pointed not to a thick bush or a distant thicket, but to a shadow in the depths of the pond.

A trail of sculk, grown into the shape of a liquid trail, snaked from a dark, beaten patch of earth to the water's edge. Something moved, or rather bobbed in the shadows. A mass darker against the water than all the rest, too dark for what it was supposed to be.

No light could break through the surface, and no form of life made a move to escape from the underside.

Ranboo's scream came out strangled, tearing his insides in two. His own breath choked him. It was enough to bring Niki running, and enough to make her gasp in turn.

Neither of them had to say a word.

Niki leapt into the pool.

Ranboo lost all rational thought. He attacked the stranger by the tree, shoving him to the floor, one hand pressed against his forehead and the other his arm. His knee crashed down on his chest, and the stranger gasped for air.

"Who are you?" Ranboo demanded. "What the *fuck* happened?"

"My name is Eryn," replied the stranger, managing to let out a sinister cackle through his breathless state, "and I killed Sapnap of Kinoko Kingdom."

No fear, no remorse, no attempt to hide the crime or who he was. If anything, it was a statement spoken with glee and triumph.

The skin beneath Ranboo's palms began to heat up and burn. It tore at his palms and seared his knee through his clothes. He let go with a yelp and rolled away, clutching his raw and piping hot injuries. Eryn scrambled to his feet and made to escape. The blow that came flying towards him was quicker.

Eryn stumbled. He tripped over his feet, senses bashed away, and collapsed at George's feet, knocked out cold. George's knuckles were black and blue from the punch.

Ranboo double checked his own hands and rushed over. "Are you alright?"

George's eyes, as they often were, were as wide as an owl's. He stared at the body lying before them, seemingly shocked by his own handiwork.

"George?"

"I heard shouting and—where's Sapnap?"

There was a splash, and someone desperately gestured their way.

"Help," Niki whispered, voice barely above a murmur and her lips blue from the cold water. She heaved something up above the surface with difficulty, close to going under herself once again. "Help me..."

As soon as he saw the soaked jet black hair, Ranboo felt his heart stop completely. He and George carefully took the fireborn out of Niki's arms, and she dove back down to retrieve something. Seconds later, she pushed a heavy stone onto the bank. Thick rope stubbornly hugged it, dark with water and laced with slimy strands of algae.

The end was tied tightly around Sapnap's neck.

They freed him from the noose and laid him out on the grass. The sun's rays were warm, but the fireborn himself had never felt colder to the touch.

Ranboo turned his lolling head towards them. He screamed again, silently. He clapped his hands to his mouth and retreated back, huddled in a muffled ball of horror.

Skin that once shone with a glowing, fiery sheen had now turned to black. Cracks and grooves crisscrossed in every direction, turning his dear friend's complexion into a cold surface of volcanic rock. Extinguished, cold, put out. All his features were frozen, a black statue now tragically unfamiliar but still so recognizable. His body was twisted in a calcinated, frozen scream, fighting for his life.

The hilt of a blade plunged deep protruded out of his chest. Clothes soaked red hung from Sapnap's limbs in heavy curtains. Weighed down by water, they stuck to the floor and the hands of those who touched them.

Acid welled up and poured down Ranboo's cheeks. It burned. Everything burned, except the one who was born to.

"He's not breathing." Niki's hands moved the quickest, patting over the fireborn's chest and gloved wrists. "He's not breathing!"

George's touches were just as quick, and even more careless. "Wake up, Sapnap."

He slapped him in the face, an impact which made Ranboo flinch but garnered no reaction from anything or anyone else. Certainly not from the frozen body beneath them.

George slapped him again and again, fingers stained with more dark ash at every blow. They seemed to be getting harder, too.

Ranboo had to step in, holding George back with every ounce of strength he could muster.

"You're hurting him," he pushed out through a tight throat. "You're hurting him, George..."

"He needs to wake the fuck up!"

George raised his hand again, but didn't let it fall. His hand curled and uncurled, cramped or uncertain, or maybe a mix of both. Ranboo let go, and he let his arm fall to his side. He was shaking.

Softer hands brushed over Sapnap, almost scared to touch him properly.

"Sapnap?" Niki called, even softer spoken than she usually was. "Can you hear me?"

She tucked her hair behind her ears and leaned in a little more. She placed one of her hands on his chest and pressed another two fingers to his neck. Ranboo waited for a sign, any sign that would contradict the realization rapidly eating him alive.

Niki didn't say anything, even after checking his breathing and pulse for a rather long time. She instead pushed up his hair from around the back of his neck.

Again, her eyes lingered for longer than they should have. When she pulled away, her eyes were glistening. She collapsed a moment or two later, sprawled out across Sapnap's chest and fisting his shirt in her hands angrily—bitterly, desperately.

Ranboo didn't need to see his lives to know.

Stabbed, suffocated, and drowned.

Each heinous murder was inscribed on the fireborn's body in far more places than just on the simple heart-shaped markings.

Ranboo crashed into Niki's side, gritting his teeth and desperately trying to get her arms around him. Anything but the cold air of Death blowing against his back.

He couldn't see George, but he could hear him, and every sound hurt.

The quiet call of Sapnap's name, followed by "brother" when he didn't answer, the sharp inhaled and the cry of agony as the heavy blanket of sorrow finally settled over them all.

Ranboo fumbled for Sapnap's hand, only to find it gloveless and flaking with every touch. If they weren't careful they would grind him down to ash, blown away by the cheerful morning breeze ignorant of everything but the promise of the wedding.

The wedding.

It was already well under way.

"We have to bring him back," Ranboo pushed out. "We can't hide this from them, we just can't..."

By then, they knew exactly *who*. The trek back was the most dreaded one of their lives.

Sapnap never got to walk down the aisle; he was carried, limp and lifeless. Ranboo and Niki shared the body between them, but the heaviness was still very much there, bogging them down and making the hybrid want to collapse with it.

As the somber procession ambled down the aisle, everyone stood up. The hundreds of guests muffled gasps and cries of disbelief, clapping shocked hands and hiding their faces away with cloaks, scarves and high collars. Some shouts were strangled, wet with sudden rushes of tears everyone had

thought would be happy ones that day. Flakes of black, burnt crust flaked off Sapnap's cheeks and the backs of his exposed hands. They floated down onto the bridge they crossed, and the pool's surface, a rainfall of ash from the sky.

As they grew closer to the arch, the hubbub died down to a heavy quiet. Festive petals and confetti were crushed underfoot, loud enough in the quiet to finally catch the attention of the one they had all dreaded to confront.

Karl turned around. Everyone by the altar stepped away, all except the leader of Kinoko. He grinned brightly, elated, even as the world darkened around him. Ranboo couldn't hold his blinded gaze, nor the beaming smile on his features that still insisted on widening as his beloved was brought closer.

"Sapnap!"

Karl's tone broke Ranboo's heart. A simple exclamation so loud and hopeful, so tender and adoring—perhaps even teasingly berating for the late arrival.

Ranboo couldn't bear to be the one who broke the news. He didn't speak. He stepped softly, and Niki did the same. He raised his tail off the ground. They laid the body across the ground.

The lack of reply dampened Karl's expression a little. He was still staring straight ahead, as if he was standing nose to nose with his fiancée, unknowing that his corpse was lying down at his feet.

A best man unknown to most helped guide Karl's hand down, down, down until he made contact with the crackled skin of Sapnap's forehead. Karl drew back abruptly. His forearm went visibly rigid, and trembled violently.

He leaned forwards again.

The pads of his fingers lingered longer, following the raised, blackened cracks in the corpse's complexion. They led him down the bridge of his nose, over his lips, under his eye and back down over the side of his jaw. Karl's exploring touches stopped when he drew circles on the raw cuts and bruising around his throat. A voice once so loud was now completely quiet, as was everything else, everyone else, and Karl himself.

They all watched him carefully explore the damage, taking every detail in with bated breath. They waited for an order to describe what lay before him—not that anyone would have willingly stepped up to the heartbreaking challenge—or even a glistening tear roll down his cheek. There was none, nothing except for the gentle rustle or his ceremonial robes rustling against both their bodies. Karl's hand went to the back of Sapnap's head and, after

gently brushing aside his black hair, felt the three hearts vertically aligned there, each fate raised like healed scar tissue.

He took a minute or two to finally pull away completely. Sapnap's head stayed still, his whole body made of nothing but crackling rock. A faint gust of wind blew a cloud of cherry blossom petals from the arch down onto him. They lingered for a moment with velveteen kisses, and tumbled off just as quickly as they had come.

"Karl?"

No one knew who had called his name, but they all waited. Ranboo felt his heart tear more with every second that passed.

Karl drew up to his full height. His hand was trembling, but the only one who steadied it was himself. He curled his fingers into his palm.

He turned on his heels and stormed off without a word. Still no orders were given, still no telling tears were shed.

Wordlessly, the venue was deserted, save for a small group that tore away the gaiety and prepared it for a somber use. Wedding presents and flower arrangements became bittersweet offerings. Congratulations became silent murmurs of goodbye, and the ceremony of marriage a melancholic wake.

The wedding became a funeral, but briefly before that, it became a courthouse.

George shoved Eryn down to his knees, and the ruling peers gathered around. "The murderer," he announced with a hiss, forcing the fireborn's head down to practically lick the floor at their feet.

King Eret stepped up first. There was a way he kept his composure through everything that was eerie, but impressive. Save for shaking hands Ranboo saw he quickly grasped and hid in his skirts, he was every inch the powerful, judgemental ruler the situation called for.

"We haven't had one of those for a while," he remarked, his tone hard but hollow.

Eryn wrestled his head out from George's grip and smirked. "Aw, is someone growing soft? Justice means nothing to any of you anymore, does it?"

"This is what you call justice?"

Eret gestured to the charred corpse laid underneath the arch. Niki was still at its side, head bowed to Sarnap's chest and as still as a statue. It was as if there were two dead bodies instead of one.

Eryn glanced at his horrifyingly brutal handiwork with nothing but nonchalance in his eyes. He shrugged. "Why, what would you call it?"

"The butchery of an innocent man."

"Innocent? You know nothing."

"Why did you do it? What could this massacre possibly be for?"

"The greater good."

He spat in the monarch's face, and everyone froze. Everyone except Eret, who didn't so much as flinch.

"The last villain who killed for the greater good broke the SMP apart," Eret replied coolly. He didn't even move to wipe the spit off his cheek. "We dealt with his case appropriately, and we'd do it again. This crime is Kinoko's to condemn when the time comes, but in the name of all the nations we will not stand by idly. We will incarcerate you until they deal with you themselves."

"And where are you planning to do that?"

"We have a secure place."

King Eret glanced at the leaders that flanked him. If their shocked gazes were anything to go by, they understood. Ranboo understood, and he couldn't hide the chill that made every hair of his stand on edge.

"Every nation will reclaim their stocked goods, and all the keys will be retrieved and melted down, except for one," Eret continued.

"And who will keep it?" asked Bad.

"The one who deems themselves worthy to fill the guardian's boots left for them."

Silence followed.

Everyone remembered what happened to the owner of those boots, what kind of horrors had befallen him when he held that absolute power over the sleeping redstone and obsidian monster.

No one wanted to repeat that part of history.

No one except for one.

Loyalty and friendship knew no fear.

"I'll do it," Ranboo found himself blurting out.

Tubbo gripped his arm in an effort to stop him. "The Warden of Pandora's Vault? Are you crazy?"

Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. He was both and neither. He was simply vengeful, simply burning with the desire of having a hand in it all, no matter how cursed it was.

It was the only real honour the remaining members of the Syndicate could offer their fallen comrade.

Their friend.

Acid tears blurred his vision.

"He's too young," Antfrost mewled softly, clutching Velvet's arm and looking pleadingly up at Eret. "Sam could barely handle it all himself, do you really think Ranboo could?"

Ranboo would have been offended if he didn't know that Ant's intentions were as sweet and pure as he was. Even if he didn't, he wouldn't have had time to wallow.

Eret's reply was what convinced them all, even the small part of Ranboo himself that protested his decision.

"Don't think that I'm happy with this either, but I've had Ranboo under my wing for the better part of a decade. I've seen him grow, and I've helped him become who he is today. If I had to trust anyone with this job, it'd be him, but the final choice is his and his alone."

"And I said I'll do it," Ranboo repeated, a newfound determination giving his words another shade of assurance. "Sapnap is—*was* one of my closest friends, and I never had the chance to tell him that enough. This is the least I can do to pay him back."

"What's the point? He's already dead."

Eryn's unwelcome interjection earned him the weight of George's boot grinding into his spine. Ranboo pursed his lips.

He had said what he had needed to say. He could do no more.

He didn't have to.

"We'll lock up the criminal tonight," Eret decided, once more sparing a glance for the fireborn. "Until then, watch him closely."

Niki suddenly sprung up. "It would be my pleasure," she hissed.

Pushing Hannah's peaceful, good-meaning touches away, she strode over to the young fireborn and hauled him up by the scruff of his neck. The knife that had been shoved into Sapnap's sternum only until recently now pressed into Eryn's back. He flailed around, but she kept her grips strong, so strong that Ranboo could almost feel the blade's tip drive through him too.

"You think a big bad dungeon can scare me?" Eryn howled with laughter, bent halfway backwards. "I've been through hell before, and I survived. This is nothing to me. You're all wasting your time."

We'll see about that, Ranboo hissed silently.

There was no other hell as cold, desolate and brutally secure in the known worlds. New life had been blown through its halls in the form of treasures and important stocks, but it would all be sucked out by the end of the day. Nothing would remain but new anger and old mechanical decay.

Pandora's Vault growled across the ocean, once again.

George knew exactly where to find Karl.

He wondered why it didn't dawn on him sooner. The hidden underground room beneath the Kinoko library must have been enchanted. George forgot it was there until he actually needed to find it, and the trapdoor faded into the floor and away from his close scrutiny.

It had survived wars, a devastating fire, and the unquenchable thirst of the curious crowd that routinely walked over the library threshold. No one knew of its existence, save for two people. Even if Sapnap had known, he had never mentioned it.

The thought that Karl had been keeping something so obviously important, no matter how secret it was, from all of them infuriated George. The fact that he had kept it from Sapnap especially left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He tore open the trapdoor, leapt down the ladder and landed with a heavy thump at the bottom. The room trembled around him. Earth tumbled down from the walls, candle flames flickered, shadows and blasts of air from the up above shook the papers.

Karl's kneeling form on the floor, drowning in a sea of fine white and silver cloth, didn't look around. His hands instead shot out to steady the canvas above him propped up on the easel.

It was the same painting of the white cherry blossom tree George had seen the first time, and it didn't seem like it had changed much since. The painting still held the mysterious air of uncertainty and watchfulness about it, but it was still quite obviously a work in progress that would never be completed. Messy strokes of jarring colours slathered the bottom—a failed attempt of a blind man continuing it alone if he had to guess. Yet, even incomplete, messy, scarred, he reached out to save it.

It made George even angrier than he thought was possible.

"You'll cry over a canvas, but not over your own fiancé?"

Karl didn't reply. Shaking fingers settled the painting back down. He knocked over a palette of dried watercolours with his elbow, and made no move to retrieve them. He continued to grip the painting as if it was all he had left in the world, all he cared about. There was more desperation in his gesture than there had been when he touched the fireborn's dead body. To George's biased gaze, there was far more tenderness too.

"He's *dead*, Karl. Sapnap's dead, and you're not doing shit about it! Eret has done more about it than you, Ranboo and Niki too, but not *you*. You just don't care, do you? You don't care about him. You never did."

Karl finally turned to him. "I love him more than life itself."

"Then why didn't you do anything to stop this?"

"How could I?"

George laughed in disbelief. He wasn't buying a single second of his act. "You expect me to believe that? What are you, really? Immortal? A demi-god? A time traveller?"

He tore a handful of sketches off the wall, crumpled them up in his fist and thrust them as close to Karl's face.

The signs had been there long ago. It took the tragic death of his best friend and George's persuasion that something could have prevented it to finally connect all the dots and speak up.

"You're the Universe's little pet in one way or another, I know you are. How could you have not foreseen this happening?"

"The same way no one else can. I'm not an oracle, I'm not a god. I'm just mortal, George, mortal and unremarkable. We all are."

The poetic ring to his hollow explanation sickened George right to his core. "You *liar*."

"I'm not lying, George."

"You *could* have prevented his death, and you *didn't*!"

"If I knew about my husband's death, I would have done everything I could and more to prevent it!"

Husband, not fiancé.

It didn't matter what anyone called him anymore. Sapnap was gone.

Sapnap was dead, and George was furious.

George took a pocket knife from the desk, one used to sharpen quills and open letters. In any hand, especially one as skilled as George's, it could become a deadly weapon of destruction.

Karl raised his head. "George, what are you doing?"

He walked towards the painting. The blade was heavy, and his footsteps too. He was going to tear it apart.

Karl's arms shot out to stop him. "George—"

He shook him off. His eyes were focused on the painting, the painting and nothing else. The picture had always looked like it was moving; the branches swayed, the petals twirled, and the dark castle windows stared back straight into the depths of his soul. He could see eyes, cruel eyes everywhere.

Mocking him, mocking what he had lost.

The first blow was the most satisfying. It ripped the picture diagonally from the top right hand corner to the bottom left one. The tree in the center was split in two.

Karl cried out. George almost expected to see a wound form on him as well as the picture, two meaningless things binded together needlessly.

He took another swing. This time, a castle tower was taken down, and its eyes with it. Scraps of canvas littered the floor, and only rags still cling on to the frame by their nails.

Karl wailed unlike anything George had ever heard before. He sunk back to his knees, hands clapped over his mouth and muffling screeches of pain. He tried to suffocate them and himself. The almighty false oracle—time traveller, immortal, whatever he was really hiding—became nothing more than a small, curled up ball of terror on the ground, trembling like a mouse and sobbing uncontrollably.

Something escaped his hand, small enough for his robes to half-hide it out of view. George picked it up.

Thick paper.

He unfolded it.

The words were written in ink, and then each pushed up through the paper with the end of a needle. One brush of a hand over them could feel every word, but George used his eyes.

He was horrified by what he saw.

I know you always wanted to finish it and never got the chance to. I'll be honest, love, I don't know how to paint. The colours got knocked over. I hope you'll forgive me for that. I wanted to finish it for you in time for the ceremony, but I don't think that's going to happen. If you find this note, I'm sorry. You could probably do it better than me anyway.

I'm not going to ask you about this place, because I think you kept it from me for a reason. I'm ready to listen if you're ready to talk, though.

-Sap

The crying had stopped. The shaking did too. In their place, Karl had risen back to his knees, all attention on the desecrated painting.

He filled the room with ice as he breathed, and in his words as he spoke. "Get out."

George didn't budge. The pocketknife fell from his grasp, as did the note. "Karl, I'm sorry—"

"I said, *get out*."

Wide eyes and a heart beating with regret yanked him to his feet. His mouth moved, but he barely controlled the words.

Karl screamed. "Get out!"

George finally snapped. "With pleasure."

He turned to leave, but Karl wasn't done yet.

"I never want to see you again."

George looked back at his friend—or the leader that once used to be. Oddly enough, he felt no searing stab of loss. Nothing as strong as Sapnap's, anyway.

"You won't," he bit out, then reluctantly added; "you'll never see anything again."

"And I'll be glad of it."

The reply came on the verge of tears, but it didn't soften George in the slightest.

With no eyes, no voices to guide his imagination and eaten alive by grief, Karl was left in the darkness. George took the lamp hanging on the wall with him, the last sliver of light in either of their lives. He took it *all* away from him, and George felt nothing.

Nothing at all.

He could care less anymore.

That was his end.

George didn't stay for the burial. That very same night, he left Kinoko Kingdom. He left the whole SMP and didn't look back.

He travelled far and wide for about a week, the only map he had being one pieced together from snippets of memories. His feet dragged him over familiar mountains, through known streams, and twisting through fields he recalled well.

Sometimes he imagined the rest of the Dream Team bounding along beside him. Most of the time, he stayed silent, thoughtless.

He had been a warrior, a king, an advisor, and now another runaway for years now, on and off but always one or the other. Sometimes, he was all of them at once, and his life had never been more dangerous.

Alone in the wilderness, without a sword in hand and a bag of meager belongings slung over his back, he had never been more vulnerable. He had also never felt more free.

On the fourteenth day of his trip, the landscape which met George's eyes was much more than a fleeting memory of his youth. He stumbled right back into another lifetime entirely, one he hadn't realized his trip had been leading to until now.

He remembered the roads. He remembered the village, and his usual path through the fields. He remembered the cobblestone cottage sitting next to the big, oak-wood cattle barn. He remembered the fraying doormat painted with the fading picture of a butterfly he had slapped on messily when he was barely three. He remembered the rough, blue varnished wood of the front door against his knuckles, the rusting door handle and the cracked lamp swaying precariously above him with every knock.

Now all that was left to wonder was if they remembered *him*.

A woman answered. The years had not been kind to her, with wrinkles and scarred skin hanging loosely off her body like sagging curtains. But it was still her, the woman he had loved above any other, with the apple pie perfume and voluminous skirts baby him would hide in out of pure delight. George would know her anywhere.

"Hey, Mama," he called softly, careful not to scare her.

She squinted at him with beady, half-blinded eyes. She seemed to be two breaths away from sending him off with a huff. However, it was rare for a mother to forget her own child. Recognition dawned on her face a moment later.

"Gogy?" she whispered, throat scratchier than it had been before. "My baby, is that you?"

George smiled. "Yeah, it's me." He held up a bunch of carrots he had snatched up along the way. "You missed these ones in the patch."

She pulled him into a teary-eyed hug, which he reciprocated just as tightly. He sobbed.

"Honey, what is it?"

"I miss them both so much," he cried out, squeezing her tighter, knowing that she wouldn't understand a thing. "They're both dead and I don't know what to do..."

His mother didn't claim to know or understand, but she wanted to. She led him inside, lit the fire, and they shared a mug of tea beside it, wrapped up in blankets.

George told her everything, from start to finish, every detail and anecdote and story he might have forgotten the true events of over time. He told her his whole life story.

As he did, he felt his tears get lighter, but his grief heavier, his culpability, mostly ignored by most in the grander scheme of things, weighing around his shoulders along with lifetimes' worth of overdue apologies.

He was no king. He was no advisor, villain, or even much of a warrior anymore for that matter. He was nothing. He had lost who he really was a long time ago when he ran away with Clay.

He found himself again that very same day, at the bottom of a mug of herbal tea and the eternal warmth of his mother's embrace.

He was just George.

He was just Gogy.

He was finally home. He could repent for his sins in peace, and this time there would be no emerald eyed boy to tear it all apart.

Chapter Twenty-Two: A Crown Of Thorns

"Sam!"

Puffy didn't expect to find him so quickly. It was hard to pinpoint his exact location nowadays, although she was getting a little better at it. Life in the palace was starting to grow on her.

At first, it was difficult. The gaping hole left within her when she and Sam broke the news to their ship's crew was large and kept stretching wider as the days dragged on. There had been no hard feelings as such, except Puffy's own that made her restless.

She had made the right choice, she was sure of it.

She still grieved deeply when her beloved galleon finally disappeared over the horizon and sailed towards new ocean adventures without her. The sea's choppy waves clapped sarcastically against the piers, resorting to mockery when salted comfort didn't work anymore.

It only made Puffy more intent on staying in the South. That same shrewd determination opened her mind and kept her confidence high.

As a result, palace life had started growing on her, surely but steadily. The land reclaimed what the ocean had lost, and did so greedily.

Her navigation senses were getting more and more familiar with the palace halls and she had the court's semi-regular routine down.

As it were, this was one of the short breaks. It meant frivolities for some, and peaceful work time for others. It depended on how much of a workaholic one was, and how much self-preservation they either did or didn't have.

She knew Sam well enough to know which one he was.

She found him in the library, sitting on the edge of a table and flicking through a history book. One hand held it while the other took messy notes on the side. He looked up when she entered. For a second, without his coronet, she could be fooled that times weren't as dire as they were becoming, and that life for them had barely changed.

"Hey," he said, grinning.

"Hey." She held up the letter. "It's from Tubbo."

He snapped the book shut and put down his pen. "What does it say?"

"I haven't opened it yet." She handed it to him. "It's addressed to you."

That hurt her only a little. Oftentimes, any letters were addressed to them both, especially from Ranboo, but a handful of Tubbo's seemed to be for her partner specifically. She didn't know why. Sam shared the contents willingly and apart from a redstone question or two, there was nothing that required any specific personal attention from him.

Maybe he was angry at her for leaving him—again.

If only she had the courage to ask him herself. When she picked up a pen to do just that the ink ran dry, and the words with it.

On her shoulder, Brian pecked her ear, effectively distracting her long enough for her concerns to slither away. For now.

Sam sliced the top of the envelope open with a flick of a letter opener and stood up. He unfolded the paper inside and began to read, pacing softly. In his eyes, Puffy could see the same excitement they'd share when news came from the SMP; bright, young, and probably quite unbecoming for a crown prince.

It was strange how she saw him nowadays. She had promised herself that no matter what happened, she would still see Sam as the bright, brilliant and gentle warrior she fell in love with, and that no bestowed rank would change that.

His close proximity to the royal crown, however, did.

It didn't change *Sam* much; he had remained himself, and even the slightly more grounded attitude wasn't as foreign as it may have seemed. In a way, he was not much different to the man who had ruled the Badlands in the past.

No, what the crown differed was how everyone—including Puffy herself—viewed him. She joined in on most of the formalities reserved for his use, even if he did not. She noted the small details and slip-ups he made, and found herself flinching and fearing the judgemental reaction of those around them. Whether or not she wanted to accept it, Crown Prince Samuel was a royal now. *Something* had to change, at some point.

As she watched him read the letter, she saw his gaze darken. The bright spark of his irises diminished, and his expression turned sullen. Her first thought, admittedly, was not why he turned somber but how his serious gaze made him look like a true monarch.

He turned away and let out a shaking breath. He dropped the letter.

Puffy snapped back to the real world. "Sam, what is it?"

"Sapnap's dead."

He staggered over to the table and gripped the edge.

Sapnap, dead?

Puffy's breath caught in her throat. "He's... what? What happened?"

"It doesn't say."

Puffy and Sapnap were never close. Their camaraderie mainly stemmed following their allyship in the Red Banquet infiltration and through Sam's love for each of them. Beyond that, they hadn't spoken much. Sapnap didn't even come to see her off when she left.

But the news of his death—his *murder*?

Puffy hadn't felt grief hit for a long time.

With shaking hands and legs, she carried herself over to the discarded letter and picked it up. She read the contents, her mind barely even acknowledging the loving familiarity of her son's handwriting.

Sam,

Sapnap is dead. He was found in the forest on the morning of his own wedding and brought back to Kinoko. His accused murderer has been captured and imprisoned. We're still waiting to see what Karl decides to do with him.

I know this message is short, but I know you and Sapnap were close. I thought you ought to know.

-Tubbo

"Oh gods, I shouldn't have left!" Sam clapped a hand to his face, shoulders shaking. "I should have been there, and maybe I could have saved him... I could have saved him..."

Puffy was with him in a flash, pressing herself against his back and holding onto him. She leaned her head against his shoulder blade.

"There's nothing you could have done," she told him.

"You don't know that, no one does! Everyone always says the same thing but they don't know anything!" He stopped and inhaled a deep breath of air. "I'm sorry, it's not your fault, I didn't mean to yell, I..."

"Hey, it's alright." She pressed a deep kiss into his spine and held herself even closer to him. "It's alright."

He had been apologizing a lot in recent times, often for no reason whatsoever. Things were starting to get to him, as they were slowly getting to them all.

It all started when Queen Sylvee missed one cabinet meeting, then two, then three. Before long, Sam was asked to attend fully in her place. Public appearances were also handed over to him, as were signings, diplomatic meetings and anything else the now bedridden queen had to do.

The reigning queen began to slow down, and her successor's own duties had started to pick up pace and importance. In less than a week, Sam was made the South's official regent. The fairytale notion of carefree princehood soon became an all too real job. The court could feel the ground shift, and they all prepared to jump ship when the time came. No one said anything aloud—to do so was the mark of highest treason—but everyone knew deep down.

The only one who didn't appear to notice it was Sylvee herself.

When Puffy and Sam went to pay a visit to the royal chambers that afternoon, Puffy was surprised to find a golden smile awaiting them. The room had never felt brighter, airier, so full of love and life.

It only made it all that much more tragic when compared to the rest of the queen's state.

"Hey, no frowning here," Sylvee teased, trying to disguise her frighteningly pale and skeletal state with her words and her giggles. "Remember? Only smiles!"

Puffy wished they could. Sam crouched down by her sister's side and took her hand.

"We just found out a close friend of ours was killed," he murmured, pressing a kiss to the inside of her palm.

Her expression darkened, matching her ghostly complexion. "Oh gods, I'm—" "It's fine, we can't all live forever."

"Yeah." She laughed again, weaker than the first time. She looked up at the painted ceiling. "I know the feeling."

The Southerners thought that their monarch would be immortal. That's all they wanted. It wasn't much to ask for, and yet Queen Sylvee still could not deliver.

It was a regret she expressed many times in the build up to her last few days, and it was one everyone in earshot shut down whenever it arose. There was nothing to forgive, nothing owed and nothing to be punished for.

Lives were draining. As saddening as it was, that was how the world went.

They all tried to make the most of the time they had left. Tina often came with fresh flower arrangements and spent hours talking to the queen about each bloom in lengthy detail. Sam read her any book she'd ask for, and played merry little tunes on the piano in the corner. Puffy didn't think she'd be able to contribute, but she was wrong. Sylvee pressed her long and hard about her high-seas adventures and demanded to hear all about them with the gentle authority of a friend, not a monarch.

It was clear that Sylvee preferred hearing others talk rather than herself, surrounding herself with art and love instead of cold silence and dreadful eulogies.

"It's all too boring," she told Puffy once, "I want my funeral to be full of flowers and music. I want to hear the world and its joy one last time. Gods know there'll be enough silence to last me for centuries afterwards."

Puffy hadn't responded to that, and instead resumed her tale about her first kraken encounter as if nothing had happened. It was easier for her to recount the life of a now-stranger of the past rather than listen to the sudden dark musings of a dying soul of the present.

She could feel the air change in the palace as the last few days rolled around slowly. Tina and the rest of the gardeners began to pay particular attention to the white lilies and carnations. Servants scampered around with armfuls of black cloth, miserably trying to hide from view. Even the guards were quieter and more reserved than usual, solemn gazes trained more often at the floor than on the rest of the world around them. Oftentimes, the palace was completely quiet, cold even.

It was as if they had already hosted Lady Death in preparation for what was to come.

There had been a slight glimmer of hope. For a couple of days, the Queen had claimed she felt better. She ate again. She could stand. She even went outside to watch Michelle train. Seepeekay had taught her well, better than anyone ever had before.

Sylvee praised both of them for their hard work and spent a pleasant afternoon bonding with her niece and making flower crowns. Puffy spent just as wonderful an afternoon as they did, watching them from the cool shade of an oak tree, Sam's head in her lap as he read.

That afternoon was the first, idyllic portrait of perfection Puffy had seen in a while. It almost fooled her into thinking everything was alright again.

Of course, it got better before it got worse. Puffy just never expected it to all come to an end so soon.

A particularly cold and lonely night had her slipping into Sam's room and cuddling up to him with their daughter. There were no judgemental guards patrolling the halls to stop her from doing so, which in hindsight should have been enough of a clue that something was off.

The dreaded—but expected—answer came along a couple of hours later, when they were both woken up by a sharp knock at the door.

"Your Majesty," Corpse said, "the queen demands your presence."

The change in titles was unmistakable. They shared no words and wasted no time.

"Ma?" Michelle sat up from where she slept wedged between them, rubbing her eye. "What's going on?"

Puffy sat beside her and took her hand. "The queen is asking for your father," she said in a whisper.

"She's going to die, isn't she?"

Puffy shushed her quickly, and cast an anxious glance to Sam. His movements became slower as he pulled his shirt over his head and wrapped his cape around his shoulders. It was as if he was trying to delay the inevitable. She only wished Time was as easy to master and control as he made it seem. All she gave as an answer was a kiss to her forehead.

When they got out into the hall, Seepeekay snapped to attention. Puffy had a private word with him.

"Please look after her," she asked, "I don't know what's going to happen tonight and I..."

"I will," he assured her, placing a paw on her shoulder.

She didn't even have the time to thank him properly. Sam's rapid footsteps and Corpse's hissed orders urged her onwards, through the dark and desolate palace. The rare few souls that they did cross were jumpy maids and weary physicians that stuck to the shadows and bowed to Sam as he passed by. They were all heading in the same direction.

They followed the dark veil of grief as it began to snake towards the royal chambers, a river of shadows faintly lit by the rays of the new moon. Its halo was faint and somber. The only light that would shine the brightest that night would be the dying queen.

One last time. The gods' eyes were on her and her alone, yet they could do nothing to save her.

The golden shine of her hair, the pallor of her skin and the sheets made the queen look like an angel more than a phantom. Through the redness around her eyelids and stagnant wetness on her cheeks, her eyes had never looked more alive and vibrant. She even smiled when they came in.

"Captain," she called, reaching for Corpse as he knelt down by her bedside. She laid her hand on the top of his head.

He arched into her palm and purred. "Your Majesty—"

"All these years and you've never called me by my name once. I haven't been a good enough friend to you, have I?"

"You've been the best, Sylvee," he replied, his tone gentler than Puffy had ever heard it before. "But I'm afraid the same can't be said for me. I've failed you. I didn't protect you as well as I promised to."

"What makes you say that?"

With a flick of his tail, he gestured to her deathbed and the bloodied handkerchief grasped in her weakened hand.

"How were you to know?"

"How was I not to know and do something, anything to prevent it?"

"You did more than enough. You were always there for me when no one else was, and your loyalty rivals all others. I need you to stay loyal, even when I'm gone. All these years, you've looked out for me and my kingdom, and I don't want that to change. My last request is for you to protect my brother and everything he holds dear as you protected me; valiantly, with courage, honour and devotion." She looked Sam's way and let out a breathy laugh. "Even if he probably thinks he's strong enough to do without."

Sam scoffed in turn and bowed his head. His grip on Puffy's hand tightened with the crushing force of a vice.

The queen turned back to Corpse, "Promise me."

The feline's gaze lingered on Sam for a long time. "Your brother has earned my respect and my service," he confirmed.

He glanced at Puffy with poison in his narrowed eyes; *she* had certainly not.

Next, Sylvee's hand reached for Puffy. "Come closer," she said.

There was a moment where she wasn't sure Sam's hand would let her. He followed her to his sister's side and stood as she knelt down.

Sylvee took her face between her hands. "I am really glad I got to meet you," she murmured with a smile. "Now I know that Sam has good people around him. He's safe and he's loved. Thank you."

She pulled Puffy in and gave her a kiss on the forehead. Her fingers were icy against Puffy's cheeks, colder than snow, colder than death. It was the clue that made it clear the angel was not eternal or immortal—she was slowly losing her grip on the living. Her lips were too, chapped and as rough as stone. Dried blood clotted between the cracks, rough against her skin. Puffy screwed her eyes shut, unable to stop the tear that rolled out.

"I wish we had more time."

It wasn't the first time she said it to someone, and it wouldn't be the last either. It would always hurt just as much.

"I think we all do," Sylvee replied, "but Lady Death is being generous right now, and I'm thankful for it."

"Her Angel will take good care of you," Puffy assured her, holding her hand one last time. "Trust me."

Before long, only Sam remained. He hadn't said a word since he crossed the chamber's threshold, and it didn't seem like he was going to anytime soon.

His sister pulled him in close and whispered something into his ear. It was too low and intimate to hear, but Sam broke down more and more with each passing murmur. The most he did was nod or shake his head with his eyes closed.

"I want to hear you one last time," she said, a little louder.

Sam opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Puffy could see him trying, in vain. The desperation and failure to speak stung her as much as it seemed to have stung Sylvee herself.

The queen, however, hid it well. "It's alright, it's fine." When he pressed his forehead to hers, her fingers drifted to his hair. Too weak to lace them through, all she did was rest them. "Seeing you again was all that mattered to me. I can leave happy, knowing that my dearest brother is going to live healthy and happy. Everything I did was for my family—I'm glad my last were for you."

Her last indeed.

Her shallow breaths stopped a couple of minutes later. The whole room stilled.

Someone whispered to a servant by the door. They ran off with featherlight footsteps. Soon afterwards, the temple's bell rang once, twice, thrice.

Loud, heavy, brooding. Another servant blew out the candles, plunging their surroundings into obscurity. Outside the window, down in the courtyard, the people's light disappeared as well as the news broke to the rest of the kingdom in one fell swoop of shadows.

All that continued to shine were the sheets and the pale, peaceful figure wrapped up in them. An otherworldly saint too pure and fragile for the crushing melancholy choking out the South.

The tocsin rang again. Everything shifted.

Soft murmurs of "long live the king" echoed from the doctors, servants and guards in attendance.

Sam left the room.

Puffy found him at dawn, huddled in a window seat with his head buried between his drawn-up knees. The air was thick with gunpowder and shuddering gasps.

Puffy sat down beside him, her back to the cool window glass. She placed a tentative hand on his knee.

He cried louder.

The funeral was large, and from a first glance appeared to be exactly as Queen Sylvee had wanted it. There were far more bright colours around her coffin than there were dark shrouds, but the somber attendance more than made up for the lack of black. The upbeat music was lacking as well. None of the musicians could quite pair the jolly tunes with the situation without getting murderous looks from the guests who thought they knew better than the dead themselves.

Sam refused to give his eulogy, despite it all being written down on paper and clenched fiercely in his hand.

Puffy had to pry it from him herself and hand it to Boomer, who spoke in his place.

"Not a good look on the new king," a snobby duchess loudly whispered to her companion a couple of pews back.

In response, Puffy only held onto Sam's arm tighter, her defense and protection in every grip, kiss and caress she gave him from that point on.

The burial itself was a private affair. Only a few were given the opportunity to attend. It took place in a locked courtyard hidden from view by high stone walls and a wrought iron gate. It housed the tombs of the monarchs of old in carved stone niches lined up along the curved circumference of its walls. A grand cathedral mausoleum with no roof, older than most of the castle itself was, yet still untouched by Time. The only marks of its passing were the rising number of dead, slow but steady. Half of the spaces were already occupied. The others were still empty and housed only dust, and would for centuries to come.

Queen Sylvee was buried next to the late King. In the days after, stonecutters came to erect and fashion the stone casing of her burial ground. Painters touched up the fresque painted on the vaulted ceiling of the burial niche, breathing new life into the flowers, fruit and clear blue sky above both tombs.

Puffy only noticed the attention to detail when she came to pay her respects, something that happened fairly often in the week following Sylvee's death. Just like many others, she had trouble letting go. It became a little easier once she realized the late queen was safe and remembered.

Once that thought crossed her mind and relaxed her a little, another important and just as difficult matter reared its intrusive head.

The coronation.

No one had been brave enough to bring it up, least of all to the new ruler himself. The affair remained silenced and stagnant for two whole weeks before Captain Corpse finally took matters into his own paws.

"Your Majesty, we need to start thinking of the future."

It was far easier said than done. Sam was noticeably reluctant, the court restless, and the cabinet insistent. Puffy was caught between them all, unsure of what to see or do.

At first, and as expected, she sided with Sam. Grief was a terrible thing and should not be rushed. No matter how painful the recent loss of the queen had been for her and the people of the realm, she knew it could never have hit them as hard as it did Sam.

He didn't talk much anymore, nor did he eat, or do anything apart from wander the palace alone in troubled thought. It was a process Puffy had seen before, and knew all too well.

Thoughts of Tommy resurfaced a lot in recent times because of it.

However, as the week or two bled into a full month, opinions changed.

Sam had chosen to leave the ocean in order to help the South and give them the ruler they deserved, and yet he was simply *not* doing that.

A quiet conversation with a panicked Boomer only confirmed the dire straits the kingdom was in. Letters had been pouring in from the redstone traders and academies from across the seas who had been interested in the offers made, and had been left unanswered. The mining operations in the mountains were ready and awaiting the royal agreement to start working. Foreign ambassadors began to seek ways of returning home for unmentioned lengths of time. The talks of new jobs and improvements to foreign politics, the internal economy and solving the few outstanding social issues within the country stopped entirely, the cabinet too nervous to dare try anything without their new king at their head.

The South had ground to a standstill, and had started to crumble little by little.

It came to the point that Boomer was even begging Puffy herself to step in.

"You're the closest person to him, you'll know what to do, what he'd do. We just need something, a word, anything to get things going again. We can't stay in mourning like this forever—it's starting to show, and it's starting to eat us alive."

"I can't take his place, Boomer."

"But—"

"I can't, I'm sorry."

"Can you at least try and talk to him?" Bulging eyes avidly pleaded with her. "He'll listen to you."

Puffy promised him she'd try, although it was hard.

She sat down with Sam one evening, took his hands between her own, and told him everything. She didn't ask him to forget his grief, but to let life in a little again. It was ready to greet him. As expected, he didn't utter a word, and didn't cross her gaze.

He did, however, embrace her tightly when she finished. When he pulled away, there were no tears in his eyes, but there was no agreeable smile on his face either. In hindsight, as she went to sleep that night, she wasn't even sure if he had listened to her at all.

But the next day, he ate a little at breakfast. Court gossip said he was sharing a few words with the royal advisors again. Puffy found him writing a letter one day, so deeply concentrated she didn't dare disturb him.

He still didn't make any public appearances, but that was alright. Puffy was happy to do so in his place, just until he got his footing again.

It didn't entail any lengthy, pompous speeches, but rather small outings into the city to prove that the palace was indeed alive in the midst of the turmoil.

She was not the only one to do so, but the most vocal by far. She was not afraid to speak her mind and the truth loudly to all who asked about the King, to reassure them all they had not been abandoned.

And the people listened.

They listened to her far more intently than they did the nobles and guards, held her and her words in higher regard, gravitated to her rather than to the lords and ladies of the court.

Seepeekay told her why with a grin: "You're closer to them than any of the dukes ever will be."

In other words, they listened to her because she was one of them, in heart and in lineage. She wasn't born into money or prestige, and any scrap of either was gained through her own hard work and merit. People admired those factors more than a fancy title.

The South began to lighten up a little. Things were getting better.

Then, the date for the coronation was set.

Sam was finally fitted for the ceremonial robes.

Nationwide grief for the late queen was alleviated in favor of growing, giddy enthusiasm and acclaim for the new era dawning.

It all suddenly became a little too real for Puffy.

The night of the Saint-Jacques ball—now distant in the midst of the difficult times that followed—, the talk of Sam taking the throne felt more like an unlikely fantasy than a real possibility. The crowning's delay following Sylvee's passing only heightened the dreamlike sensation that everything was a hoax.

Maybe it was nothing but a collective hallucination, and it would end soon enough. Then they'd be off riding the waves once more, and the South would go on to join their long list of adventures and fade into memory.

She had never felt as stuck to land as she was then.

On the night preceding the ceremony, Puffy needed air. She didn't go out into the gardens, nor did she go to the seashore. She ventured back out into the city, except this time without warning and not as part of an escort.

The last time she had seen the streets decorated as grandly as they were then, it was with black curtains and funeral flowers. Now bright banners hung between rooftops and even the darkest of alleyways were bursting with colour and cheer.

She admired very little of it. Every glance was another hard pinch that reminded her it wasn't a fantasy. She wanted to forget it all for a bit longer, and there was only one thing that could help her do so.

Puffy went into a tavern and ordered a strong tankard of rum.

The place was already crammed full of patrons, all routinely raising toasts to the health of their new monarch. All drinks were on the house, as were all the other nighttime pleasures the establishment offered. They were all sampled and devoured eagerly.

Between the loud music and the ear-ringing chimes of glasses crashing against one another, whispers about the new king began to emerge. Puffy couldn't help but listen in.

As expected, many of them were wrong. No, Sam was not as strong as ten men; no, he did not claim the throne by force; and no, he definitely wasn't the one who poisoned his own sister for power. Those drunken claims, thankfully, would be forgotten come the morning hangovers.

Some of them, however, were surprisingly spot on. The King was reluctant to claim the crown handed to him, he was still tearfully mourning his predecessor, and his history was questionable, or so sparse whispers claimed. Those too would be cast away at sunrise.

Regardless, the patrons seemed satisfied enough with the monarch, and wished him the best for tomorrow from the bottom of their glasses.

Only one of them didn't.

"This is a fucking a circus," scoffed a stranger at the bar. "What a show."

His murmurs caught Puffy's attention, mainly because they weren't meant to. They were thoughts that only seemed to have been dragged out by an excess of alcohol and an absence of self-control. Blasphemy and treason didn't matter when they were private but slippery tongues stinking of drink begged to differ. The general hubbub hid them reasonably well, rendering them unheard by all except those close to him.

Puffy was the only one, although it was likely he didn't know that. His back was turned.

"They weep over their dead queen for a second then go crazy over the new king, just like that," he continued. "No sense of dignity or lasting loyalty. Pathetic."

He popped open a sliver, battered flask and poured a few drops of the contents into his glass. He downed it in one swig and rang up the bartender for more.

As they poured out the drink, he poured out the rest of his thoughts. "I used to run a place like this one, and y'know what? I think I did better than whatever's going on here. It was legal and everything."

"I'm sure it was," sighed the bartender, rolling their eyes.

Such tall tales were probably a frequent and exhausting part of their life. They walked away, but the patron wasn't done.

"I've been through death and back, literally. I've seen shit you wouldn't believe, but holy *fuck* this takes the cake. Some random dude comes out of nowhere to claim the royal title, gets it and then does fuck all with it. No, really, those are some big balls if I've ever seen any."

Puffy's interest turned from mild to deeply invested, and angrily so. Her grip on her tankard tightened.

"Maybe he really *is* made for the role; just another stuck up royal who thinks the world revolves around him and that his kingdom will wait for his tears to dry. I say they shouldn't, and they should do something about it before everything goes to shit."

Inciting rebellion was always a dangerous game to play, especially in tense times like these, especially before the anointing of the new monarch. If Corpse was there, the drunkard's head would have probably been shoved on the end of a pike by now. Puffy would have been glad to join him, for once.

"Seriously, this new king must be a selfish, arrogant, evil motherfucker to do everyone dirty like that."

Her grip grew tighter, and it was becoming harder and harder for her to sit there calmly and composed. Every insult felt like a personal attack, the cutting edge of a knife that tore her apart as much as it did Sam's reputation.

"Or maybe he's just nothing at all; useless and too pathetic to meet the public's eye." He raised his drink. "Here's to what we hope will be a short reign, for everyone's sake."

Puffy finally snapped.

"One more word about him and I'll kill you!" She yanked the patron around to face her, clawing into his shoulder. "He's doing his best and he's a good man who doesn't need people like you trying to—"

She cut herself off mid-sentence and let go.

A twisted grin of disbelief appeared on the drunkard's face. "No fucking way."

Puffy's jaw dropped.

Oh my gods.

This was a nightmare.

She had to be dreaming.

Schlatt shrugged sheepishly. "What's up, Puffy?"

She punched him square in the jaw.

He fell off his stool and landed heavily on the floor, cursing and rubbing his sore head. Staff and customers alike turned to see what was happening and marveled at the commotion. After all, what was a good drinking evening out on the town without a decent tavern fight?

Puffy's head was swimming, but clearly a lot less than Schlatt's. She had never seen him look so dazed and lost. It would have been a sight to behold, if she wasn't so intent on mashing his hairy face into the ground.

She ground her hoof down into his chest. "You said I'd never see you again."

"What did you think that was, a promise?"

"Ideally, yes!"

She was about to go in for another blow when two pairs of arms stopped her and pulled her back. Another two, slightly more sober, patrons helped heave Schlatt to his feet.

He shook them off, struggling to regain his balance. "It's fine." He gave her a sickening smile, oozing with mockery. "We know each other, right honey?"

As the rest of the tavern awaited her response, Puffy held her tongue. She roughly shook off her own pair of restraints. Their grip was immediately

replaced by Schlatt's own. He pulled her towards a booth near the back of the establishment.

He sat her down and took a seat in front of her, still grinning and greatly oblivious to the sharpened spears in her eyes ready to skewer him alive. Both of them waited until the rest of the tavern brouhaha got back on track and forgot them before saying anything.

Puffy was the first. She would have gone off at him with a million different questions and lashes, all fuelled by the same burning curse she shot up towards the gods.

Of *all* the people, of *all* the places...

She stopped herself, abruptly taking in his appearance. The same vicious eyes, the same boisterous and slimy tongue, the same unkempt beard and mutton chop sideburns, the same and disgustingly familiar sleazy smirk. Something big was still missing.

She realized what when she looked at either side of his head.

"Your horns..."

"Reminded me too much of that shithole of a land. Had to do something about them." He touched the jagged stumps. "Anyway, you won't believe what some people are prepared to pay for beauties like mine. I made myself a fucking fortune."

The only thing that had enticed Schlatt to sacrifice his vanity was the thought of money. No surprises there whatsoever.

"So, what?" she asked him. "Are you here on a cruise? A holiday?"

"Depends, are you?"

"Not anymore."

"You know how much I *love* gossip." He invited her to continue with a wave of his drink. "Spill the beans."

She narrowed her eyes. "No, I don't think I will. I don't owe you anything."

"I literally saved your loverboy's ass from dying alone in a crummy cell," Schlatt hummed. "You owe me *something*."

Puffy stayed put and silent. He got the message.

"Alright, fine, I'll go first. I travel a lot now and I just happened to pass through here as all the shit with the queen's death was going around. There, happy?"

"I didn't see you during the Great Battle."

"I was just smart enough to leave the SMP before it all went down. Heard Dream lost, definitely dodged a bullet there. Congratulations by the way; what a victory."

The losses had been terrible. The triumph was sour, at best.

"That masked bastard gave me life again and I lived it."

"By drinking."

"And by setting up my own business venture."

"A scam, if I had to take a guess."

"Depends on how you look at it."

He took out a deck of cards from his tattered pocket and laid them out in a fan, face down on the table. The backs shone, decorated with spiralling patterns of copper leaf.

Puffy raised an eyebrow. "Professional gambling? Magic?"

"Divination," Schlatt corrected, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Divination?" Puffy looked him up and down. "That is the *last* thing I would have imagined you doing."

"I have my ways. How else do you think I got my hands on the Revival Book and gave it to Dream?"

"Wait, *what?*"

"You know what, fuck you. Business is booming everywhere! I'm a travelling sensation!"

She wondered if any of his bamboozled—and undoubtedly swindled—customers could say the same.

"Well, everywhere except here. I'm planning to move on tomorrow; everyone here's been moping around and doing nothing else. Didn't even get a single request, not even one. Fucking waste of my time and money."

He sat back and stared at her expectantly, inviting her to talk with a flick of his fingers. She kept her mouth shut.

He sighed, "I told you my story, now you tell me yours."

"Why?"

"You owe me twice."

"Twice?"

He counted on his fingers. "First I gave you the keys to the Vault, second you punched me five minutes ago. You owe me twice, at least."

She glared at him.

"Alright, we'll play a game, then; I ask you questions, you answer. Good enough for you?"

He wasn't going to leave her alone, and she started to understand that quite well.

She settled herself better, hands clasped on the edge of the table. "Fine."

The ram's grin was unnecessarily sadistic. "Perfect. I'll get this one out of the way first: you left the SMP, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"How long ago?"

"Three years."

"With whom?"

"The people I love."

"So, Tubbo's here too?"

Puffy looked away. She bit the inside of her cheek, hard. Copper-tasting blood spilled onto her tongue.

"You left him again?" Schlatt let out a roar of laughter. "Oh, you can't blame *me* for this one now, can you?"

Her whole body stiffened. "We talked before I left, and I asked him if he wanted to come. He refused. There's nothing more to it."

It had been a difficult conversation, to say the least. The question of "why?" at the time was one she didn't have an answer to; the ocean would not have let her give it. Its hold had been too strong, and any other reply would not have been satisfactory enough for her son. He had made that clear.

His absence of any real letters to her told her that too.

"I think I lost him again," she whispered before she could reel herself back. "I think he hates me."

Schlatt didn't clap back immediately, which admittedly was a novelty. Then, he raised his glass.

"Cheers to that, then. We're both in the same boat again, just like old times."

There was nothing celebratory about his remark; both his own tone and her reaction to it were mirthless.

"Cheers," she muttered, and gulped down the rest of her rum.

Schlatt asked no more questions for a good while, but Puffy found herself suddenly wanting to talk regardless.

If she had a coin for every time her therapist in dire situations happened to be her drunken and presumed dead ex-partner, she would have two of them. It wasn't a lot, but it was deeply concerning that it had happened twice.

"I've found out that the reason I've been running away from so many things is because of something I couldn't control. I was fooled into thinking I was free to do as I pleased. Maybe if I had found out earlier, I could have done something about it and avoided a lot of the shit I got myself into. I would have been a good mother to Tubbo, but it's too late now. The damage has been done. I can't go back, and now things are going downhill again. Everywhere I go, problems follow and everything's becoming too real and... I don't know what to do."

The helplessness was crushing, and the drink was a good liberator. Puffy quickly wiped away the tear that ran down the side of her face. She sniffled, despite trying to hide it all.

"No, no," Schlatt groaned, "don't fucking *cry*. Gods, I don't know how to deal with this kind of shit! I hate water. It's too valuable a source. Water your damn plants with beer."

Schlatt leaned over and poured the rest of his flask's contents into her tankard. She didn't dare touch it.

Her eyes, however, landed on the fanned out cards in front of him.

"Give me a reading."

"What?"

She couldn't remember the last time she had tried to solve her problems through party-tricks and the empty words of an oracle. She must have been younger than ten, brooding over an unrequited childhood crush and finding her saving grace in the magical reading powers of an ancient woman during a town fair.

Schlatt was old but not ancient, he was not a woman, and he very likely did not have any magical powers—she was sure she would have known by now—but at that moment, he was all she had.

And she was growing desperate.

"Give me a reading," she repeated, composing herself and pointing to his cards. "I can pay. You would have at least gotten *one* client before you leave."

Schlatt considered her with a raised, bushy eyebrow for a few seconds, then shrugged.

"If you say so."

He leaned back. Neither of them moved or said anything. The ram began to drum his fingers on his elbow. She cast awkward glances elsewhere, unsure of what to say or do.

"What are you waiting for? Pick."

"Oh, right." She paused. "How many?"

"Depends. You want a quick read or an in-depth one?"

"As precise as you can be."

"Go for ten, then."

She did just that and spread them out in front of them both. Schlatt turned them over one by one, and Puffy did a double take.

"These don't look like tarot cards," she pointed out.

Schlatt paused at the fifth card and looked up at her. "Ever heard of getting custom made stuff? Small artists need the work, y'know."

"Yeah, but—" She peered at a couple of them. "—I don't remember "The Sunset" or "The Windmill" as part of the original game."

"Look, do you want me to do this or not?"

"I do."

"Good. You'll stay quiet then. No, this is not the kind of set you'll find anywhere else. It's my own, and I prophecize by my own rules thank you very much. There isn't one right way to tune into the gods, is there?"

Guru Schlatt was still not a good or a trustworthy look on him—too much farce and deceit—but oddly enough his words still rang true. The biggest whiplash of them all however was the fact he was supposedly listening to the gods. Everything he had done in life up to that point had been to spite them. It was a strange realization, to say the least.

Strange, but somewhat comforting. He was at least confident enough that they were there in the South and hadn't completely forsaken them.

Schlatt bringing along the first glimmer of hope in ages was unheard of, yet so was Puffy ever leaving the sea. It all came from the unlikeliest of places.

The ram pointed to the first card.

"The Sunset; pretty straightforward. A day or a chapter comes to a close, and a new one will rise up after it. Sounds about right so far."

Generic to be sure, but correct. She nodded.

"Next, we have The Purple Hyacinth; again, pretty obvious. You're plagued by regret and remorse over something, someone, maybe many things at the same time. It's a bulbous flower, so although it may die with some seasons, it will always return and rejuvenate with the others. You need to find the roots of your regrets and unearth them from there. Don't let yourself get

bogged down. You're not doing yourself any favours. Rip them out, or stop entertaining the notions and nurturing them. It's not worth it."

"The White Veil, the card associated with love of any kind. You picked it right-side up, so whatever the fuck you're doing in that department, the gods are in favour of it. Get married, have kids, I don't know. Just follow your heart, assuming you have one."

She almost punched him again for that, but she wanted to hear more.

"The Windmill, also known as The Wind. Things will change, in one way or another. Strong breezes bring along plagues and trouble, but also fill ship sails and shift winter's air into spring. You just have to trust it, and it'll trust you and bring you what you need. Change is coming, but you need to believe it will be a good one. Like a windmill, you need to spin with it, not against it. Be resilient."

"The Unicorn; the symbol of power, grace and purity, although it may come with a price. Unicorns are solitary creatures, so expect any thrones to seat you and you alone. It can also just mean you'll be a great monarch, not necessarily lonely or anything. I'm just legally obligated to frighten you a little, or else divination isn't fun."

At the halfway point, Schlatt paused and looked up to check if she was still listening. She was. He went on.

"The Rose Bush; the links you forge are going to stay strong for a long time to come, whether you want them to or not. They'll entwine and ensnare you and while some will bloom with flowers, others will remain as thorns and choke you alive. Fun times."

"The Lost Satin Slipper; something will drop out or get lost, something unexpected. It might be a loss of rank, or a sudden realization that something big just doesn't matter anymore. It's not massive or serious as such, just maybe temporarily inconvenient."

"The Muddied Traveller; part of the past will come back. Although you might not recognize it at first, you should let it in. It may look big and scary, and it might reveal something you would have rather forgotten about or ignored, but it's here to help you and guide you. Accept it cheerfully, because that means your past history thinks you're worth hanging onto a little longer."

He pointed to Apollo's Lyre. "Not much of a musician, are you?" he said.

She shook her head.

"Doesn't matter; music will come along and lift your spirits when you need it most. There's nothing more I can say about that one. Be nice to the local bands, I guess, fuck if I know. What am I, a fortune teller?"

It was hard to know for sure if that was a rhetorical question or not. Puffy soon brushed it aside when the final card came along.

It depicted a stocky, horned creature with what seemed to be a mouth open in a perpetual scream of fear and anguish, covered from head to toe in a strange substance somehow looking like a mix of slime, moss and fur. It was nothing like Puffy had ever seen before.

"And finally, The Unknown; big, strong, confident. It can heal and protect as much as it can kill and maim. It can bring war and death, but it can also bring peace and life. I can't say much more about it, except to be careful. There's no telling which way the gods will choose to side with. Just... stay alert."

A worryingly macabre note to end on, to be sure.

Puffy wasn't going to lie, more than half of the reading didn't really make sense to her, but then again that was the point. It wasn't about the present, but rather the future. She'd just have to hold out hope for the cards she didn't understand the true meaning of yet.

But the ones she did...

She was speechless.

No, *more* than speechless.

"Appeased" would be the right term for it.

"That... was actually pretty good."

She didn't expect it to be. Especially not from Schlatt.

It gave her a lot to think about. A lot. It also gave her some answers, two of which meant everything at that moment.

She personally thanked herself for managing to pick The Sunset and The White Veil. She knew what she had to do, and what she wanted. She had the inklings before, but now she was certain of it all. The path had never been clearer.

And it was all thanks to a party-trick. She somehow *still* couldn't wrap her head around the possibility that Schlatt had been reborn spiritually.

Some things were *that* hard to believe.

The ram smiled at her. It was so fake and rehearsed, it was almost laughable. "Glad I could help."

Puffy drank the rest of her tankard in one fell swoop. The contents of Schlatt's flask shot through her, and it was disgusting. How he spent years drinking the same thing was beyond her. It did however act as yet another welcome wake-up call.

"You're leaving tomorrow, right?"

"Yep, and you're staying for good," he guessed.

Godsdamn right she was!

And she was certain he wasn't going to come back either.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Schlatt held out his hand, awaiting payment. "Ten, please."

She handed over the fee in question. "No discount?"

"For what, punching me? Nice try."

"If you knew how high I've risen recently, you'd be demanding more."

"Windfall?"

"Close. More like a place in court."

"Wait, you know the new king?"

The smile she gave him was nothing short of conspiratory. "I know him very well."

Schlatt's eyes lit up with understanding. "Holy fucking shit, is it S—"

She left the tavern and marched back up to the palace.

The next morning, she joined Sam outside the temple doors.

"They're all waiting for me," he whispered as the muffled excitement from the other side began to leak through.

"Yeah, they are."

"They're restless."

"I can't blame them; they're not only about to get a new king, but get the kindest, most genuine and loving one there's ever been."

Sam chuckled weakly. "You're putting a lot of faith in me."

"I always have."

As time ticked on, she helped readjust his coronation robes. Dark blue wasn't a usual colour to see on him, but it was nice nonetheless; it was deep, rich, powerful. Looking at him now, she wouldn't have guessed he was ready to pass out on the spot. It was only until she touched his arm she realized how much he was really trembling.

"Love, look at me." He turned, and she took his hand. "Whatever happens, I'm staying with you. You're going to go in there a prince and come out as a king, but I know your heart will stay the same. That's all that matters to me. You'll still be you."

"You don't know that for sure," he stammered. "Anything could happen."

"I have faith." She reached up and left a kiss on his cheek. "Come what may."

He didn't even have the time to answer her back. The doors were pulled open, and he stepped into the temple.

His hand slipped from hers. When she'd hold it again, he'd be a king. Or perhaps etiquette would prevent her from doing so.

She watched the coronation from the threshold, daring not to take a single step further into the temple.

She wasn't a noble, she wasn't a royal, and she wasn't a guard. She was hardly a sea captain anymore either. In the kingdom's eyes she was nothing but an afterthought, a strange apparition from the brine that wasn't important enough to be fully immersed in the court, and not *unimportant* enough to be cast aside with the rest of the servants.

She was the Crown Prince's "friend", and nothing more.

Well, not the Crown Prince anymore.

Now they were all acclaiming King Samuel of the Southern Lands with loyal chants of his title and cheers of longevity and prosperity.

Puffy should have been elated by the ceremony as much as everyone else was. Her recent epiphanies demanded her to be.

She still couldn't do away with the small jab of uncertainty that pricked her like a needle; just light enough to be felt, not enough to warrant more than a small, saddened frown.

As petals poured down and the crown on Sam's head shone, the world stilled.

In the end, cards were just cards, and liars would always stay liars to some degree. Reality wasn't as easy to do away with as many hoped it would be.

Puffy swallowed hard.

Where do we go from here?

Chapter Twenty-Three: Pandora's Curse

Eryn was locked in Pandora's Vault at 15:47. Two days after Sapnap's death, one after his funeral.

They had all greatly underestimated the amount of work required to properly get Pandora's Vault back into a proper prison again, and turning himself into its Warden. There was the matter of seclusion and loneliness, reclaimed once every nation had reclaimed their effects. The longest part was taking out Kinoko's belongings, the country so deep in mourning that not a single dispatch was sent out. The Badlands took charge of bringing them back their books, scrolls and cartloads of ancient artifacts. Bad was at the head of their procession, hood pulled up and back hunched over the reins.

The grief was still there, lingering in everyone who had ever known Sapnap and even those who had only heard the tales of heroic deeds. It was almost worrying how the only pieces that remained of him were the good ones. Mistakes were forgotten and ignored in favour of flattering, fond reminiscing.

It had certainly made it harder for anyone to move on so quickly, but far easier for Ranboo to realize he had made the right decision.

Taking the job of the Warden of Pandora's Vault was a madman's folly, the punchline of a bad joke many still struggled to believe was real, and a death

sentence. The death of what? Humanity's sense, maybe. Warmth. Kindness and golden hearts.

That single duty had stained the reputation of the one that had come before, sullied Sam's history when it didn't deserve to be. It had driven many mad, and had taken lives. The prison was the big black blot in every story, memory and glance towards the Badlands and their coastline.

And yet Ranboo had still jumped at the opportunity to guard it.

Those who still doubted he had any scrap of sanity left at all tutted with rolling eyes and 'I told you so's. Those who knew better were frozen to their core.

Ranboo felt nothing. He knew what he had said, and what needed to be done. There was nothing so shocking about that, now was there?

The Greater SMP's palace had a small dungeon. The Badlands had the caves and the abilities to make many others if they so wished. Neither of them were offered up. All eyes and minds were on the Vault and the Vault alone.

They had chunked one villain inside before, and they weren't afraid to do so again, even if it meant tearing down its peaceful new function in order to do so. Everyone who had known the old Warden knew that Sam hated the prison's original use with a burning passion and had suggested the fortified warehouse as an alternative in order to make up for the grief.

But Sam was gone, so who cared anymore?

It seemed like Pandora's Vault was always meant to be a dungeon, and no well-meaning change made by her own creator could take that away for good. Purpose would always come running right back to where it belonged.

While the Vault was being sorted out, Ranboo had snapped straight away into his role. He and Niki had watched Eryn like a pair of hawks, pointing sharp blades and talons to his throat for hours on end. No food, no water, no rest could have ever made them waver. They were glued to their places by something far stronger than hunger and exhaustion. An anger boiling so fiercely it surpassed all else, and a sadness so deep they tried to make up for every failure with every ounce of their souls.

The murderer said and did nothing. He didn't attack them, try to run or take his own lives. He didn't apologize or express any remorse for his actions either. He didn't shed a tear and since his pronounced predicament, didn't laugh or smirk anymore. The heavy netherite chains that bound his wrists

and ankles were silent. He was as still as a statue, and was one no one wanted to see.

Ranboo wanted to tear him apart and it took everything in him to prevent him from doing so. It had been decided that Eryn was Kinoko's to deal with for good, in due time. All he had to do was make sure he survived until he saw justice.

Technoblade would likely be crossing his arms and shaking his head if he could see him now.

The Syndicate's honour surpasses all other governments, he'd say.

He wouldn't be angry, just sigh in disappointment, sure that he had taught Ranboo better than that.

But Techno wasn't here—there was no honour to be found in *that*, either! If the Syndicate mattered so little to the piglin in the end, then why should Ranboo's thoughts torment him with those kinds of accusations?

There was no honour in the quick, painless death of a criminal. There was no honour in dealing out justice in someone else's place. No matter how sacred the Syndicate's bond was, it was no secret to anyone within it that some others were even stronger.

Karl's love for Sapnap rivalled anything the last two stragglers of the Syndicate could ever hope to challenge. Ranboo would not be keeping Eryn alive for him and Niki, not for Kinoko, not for the other SMP monarchs, but for the grieving partner who had lost it all. Ranboo would uphold that duty until his last life was stripped from his body.

Ranboo noted everything down now. Dreamy ramblings in his memory book turned to meticulous lists of timestamps and bullet point notes—his journal became a serious log-book.

So, at 15:47, the lava dispensers around the holding cell creaked to life once again and poured their piping hot contents out, but everyone soon noticed a problem.

Eryn was left chained up inside the cell while redstone engineers from the Badlands and fireborn helpers hacked into the systems and scooped away all of the lava that had once given the Vault's security its smoking infamy.

The plans for the building had been given to Tubbo some years ago now in a fatherly gesture from Sam, and the ram had graciously decided to head the prison's conversion project.

His team of engineers put in place an intricate piping system that dove underground and opened into the ocean. Once all the fire was gone, the cold waters crashed in. Waterfalls fell steadily all throughout the prison. Their constant roaring was enough to deafen anyone who had the misfortune of spending too long in the obsidian halls.

Pandora's Vault, once the Overworld's incarnate of fire and brimstone, became Poseidon's own whirlpool in a fishbowl.

The dramatically dropping temperatures, the wilderness of the captured waves and the wind they whipped up, the stench of the brine so strong it clogged his nose and almost made him sick—his life in the unforgivable arctic tundra had prepared him well for such a frozen hell. So well it scared all those who crossed his path. Engineers, bundled up warm, gave him incredulous looks when he surveyed their work with rolled up sleeves and a tattered waistcoat. Even Tubbo had to cautiously suggest he at least put on a jacket. Ranboo refused, and he never flinched.

Nothing could be colder than the snowdrift that snatched his first life from him. He still had the scars and shattered heart to prove it. The numbness was not something that easy to replicate unless he chose to die again.

A slight chill never bothered him anyway.

His absence of reaction only solidified his place as a grieving madman to the rest of the realms.

Maybe he *was* the perfect candidate for the Warden.

The true heaviness of the burden began when Eret handed him the keys to the prison. All the remaining sets had been melted down into just one.

It was two days after the engineers had finished the final checks—four days after Sapnap's death, three after his funeral—at noon precisely.

"Good luck," the king had told him in a whisper, "and be careful, Ranboo."

His nervous well-wishes sounded more like final goodbyes. It was as if he knew something Ranboo didn't, or dreaded a prospect he himself hadn't envisaged.

At 12:20, Ranboo entered the prison alone for the first time ever.

At 12:23, he locked the doors.

His first few hours were spent alone, in the dark. He didn't dare switch on the lights, choosing to instead bask in the obscurity and tremors of his new friend. The redstone groaned, the ocean waters churned. The keys were heavy and rubbed against his palm.

Above all, the extreme sensation of solitude was soul-crushing.

It was only then that Ranboo truly took the time to reflect on everything—his age, his impulsive choice, even the actions of his predecessor.

If Sam had barely made it out of the Vault's clutches alive, both metaphorically and literally, what hope was there for him?

His fear shackled him to his spot for what felt like days. In that time of frightened meditation, the Vault began to mellow. He grew used to it; the raging wates, the phantom mechanical jitters, even the loneliness.

He finally switched the lights on and embarked on his first patrol of the complex. Sam had never offered any guided tours around the prison and for good reason. Not only would it have been a liability, but the endless obsidian hallways would have depressing for anyone to linger in for longer than they needed to.

Those same halls were about to be Ranboo's whole life for gods know how long.

He brought his memory book along and sketched out his own maps—the official blueprints were too foreign and too complicated for him to attempt to understand them. For the next few days, pacing corridors and mapping them out was all he did.

If he didn't write any of it down, he'd forget it. He didn't estimate, however, that his frantically scratching pen wasn't the only thing that recorded everything. His own body had learned his routine—his rigid stance, his cold and stern demeanour—and could perfect it even when his memories could not.

After a week, he didn't even end up needing the maps he had painstakingly created.

He did the same patrols every day, at three different times: 6:00, 12:00 and 18:00. He marched down the whole length of the prison until he got to the holding cell. There, he spent exactly fifteen minutes staring through the curtains of water and into the black room suspended beyond.

The glowing orange shadow in the distance was always there—a little more active some days than others, his aura flickering through the waterfalls like the agitated flame of a candle—but Ranboo paid little to no mind to him.

The line he wrote down was always the same: *Prisoner is secure.*

He instead took those fifteen minutes to stare at the cell itself. To think that single black box had not only housed Dream, but had claimed Tommy's last original life and had almost snagged Sam's in the process too. So much death and despair in one room, and now that same spot was completely under Ranboo's own control.

He was far more powerful than he or anyone else realized. He wanted to make a proper difference in the world, and maybe this was how.

This *had* to be how.

Two weeks after Sapnap's death, when that realization came along, he went out with a list and a determined strut. The outside light was so unfamiliar to him now that he purposely tried to stay in the shadows.

He commissioned the sturdiest set of armour his money could buy. Diamond, melted with hints of silver and netherite. Its surface undulated beneath the sun, waving and swirling like troubled waters and brewing typhoons. He sent out for his old, heavy cloak from the days of the Antarctic Commune and had a tailor patch it up. He also purchased a spear with a jagged harpoon end and, in a fleeting moment of surprise, a scarf thick enough to cover his nose and mouth.

Perhaps his tolerance to the new freeze coating Pandora's Vault was high, but he didn't want any chances of falling sick. He could not afford a single day off.

He didn't think too much of his appearance until he passed in front of the bakery on his way back to the Vault.

"Ranboo, is that you?"

Ranboo turned towards the voice. He had no clue what kind of look he had given in response, but it had been enough to make Niki take a step back. She stared at him a moment longer, mouth agape, then averted her eyes, apologized for disturbing him and ducked back into the shop.

He caught sight of himself in the bakery's display window. In a flash, silver turned to gold, black and blue to green, and the scarf into a gasmask. It

disappeared a moment later, but the vision was still engraved, hazy contours of the past Warden still outlining his reflection.

Sam would be proud—or rather he would be appalled. Horrified, even.

Niko certainly was.

Ranboo knew he should strip off his face covering, discard his weapon and go to talk to his friend, but one look at his pocket watch told him otherwise. He had exactly six minutes and thirty-four seconds before he was late for his next patrol.

Any explanation or apology would have to be left to prosperity's sake.

The next couple of months were very much marked in passing by his routine in the prison. Fully immersed in his role, it had never felt easier. Doing everything alone was no longer as daunting as it used to be and, dare he say it, the Vault finally started to feel like home.

Tubbo went to the prison often.

No visitors were allowed beyond the front lobby, not that anyone wanted to see the criminal locked inside anyway.

The ram himself only came for the Warden himself—his best friend, his partner in crime. He brought him food and news of the outside world he no longer seemed to be a part of.

It should have been a pleasure to do so. Unfortunately, things had changed very quickly.

Their last tête-à-tête had gone something like this:

"Sam sent us another letter."

Ranboo made an approving noise and Tubbo opened it. He read the first lines and frowned.

"He wrote about Sapnap a bit," he said, purposely avoiding reading his exact words.

They tugged hard at the ram's own heartstrings, so he could only imagine how seriously they could tear down Ranboo. He instead cleared his throat. He laughed.

"Seems like they've finally decided to settle down somewhere, good for them. Michelle is alright, Puffy is too, and—wait, look at this! "His Royal Majesty, King Samuel I of the Southern Lands." That's a mouthful and a half! Do you think he's messing with us? Oh, wait, he is, kind of." He read the postscript scribbled underneath. ""Or Sam, for short. I couldn't resist signing off like that at least once. I'll never ask you to call me by any title; you're my son, Tubbo.""

He momentarily choked up. *Son*. He didn't linger too long. He had the rest of the day to fawn over that snippet.

"So he's got a throne now, apparently. He doesn't say much about it but I'm going to pester him until he does. Wanna join me?"

"I think I'll write a letter to him myself. I have some questions regarding the Vault."

Tubbo looked up. Ranboo was barely paying any attention to him or anything he was saying. The title of king didn't seem to faze him. In fact, it didn't seem to interest him at all.

The ram's ear's drooped a little. He barely recognized the hybrid sitting in front of him anymore. "What's up?"

"One of the gears sounds like it's loose," Ranboo said, pointing up at the high ceiling. "I need to get that checked out."

"I could—"

"The Badlands have a special team of engineers handpicked for these situations. I'll send for them if I don't manage to fix it myself."

"Yourself? Since when have you every understood redstone?"

"I don't, but I know the prison."

"Oh, right." Tubbo twiddled his thumbs, all letters and attempts at witty banter cast aside. "Michael misses you."

"What?"

Ranboo's attention had wavered yet again, this time focused on his memory book and what he was writing in it.

Tubbo sat up straighter and raised his voice. "Your son misses you," he repeated, louder.

"I'll have to see him, then."

As if Michael was just enough meeting or scheduled appointment, a side duty needing to be tended to from time to time.

"You're going to have to come up to Snowchester, then."

"Can't you bring him here?"

"No," Tubbo decided, putting his hoof down. "I don't like this place. It sucks out souls. I'm not putting Michael through a routine of coming here."

He got no answer except for a dismissive hum. The pen scratched the paper. It grated Tubbo's nerves.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Hm."

"Take your scarf off, I want to see you."

"What?"

"Take your scarf—"

Ranboo finally lifted his gaze and stared, dumbfounded, as if Tubbo had just asked him the most ridiculous question in the universe.

The ram sighed and pushed himself out of his chair. "Nevermind."

As he was leaving, he brainstormed yet *another* excuse to tell his son about why his second dad *still* hadn't come back from the shop with the milk.

Tubbo hadn't been too keen to go back to the Vault since. The only thing that did was the thought of Ranboo starving to death. Everyone else was too scared to approach the prison. These new dire times bore an uncanny resemblance to the "good" old bloody days of the SMP.

And as usual, Tubbo was one of the only ones with bold balls left.

One of them.

When he came to the prison again, approximately two months after Warden Ranboo was put in charge of it, he found another soul inside. Again, they were no further in than the front desk, but their voice would have most

certainly carried throughout the rest with how loud they were speaking and how desperately they were grovelling at Ranboo's feet.

"I need to see him!"

"The prisoner isn't receiving anyone."

"Did he really say that, or is that what you've decided?"

"I am the Warden, what I say goes. Leave, now."

"But—"

"Are you an accomplice to his crime?"

"No, but—"

"Then I suggest you leave—" His hand tightened around his sharp harpoon's handle. His gloves squeaked as he did. "—or I will start to consider you as such, and deal with you accordingly."

"He's the only friend I have, and he's only got me. I just need to make sure —"

The trident hit the floor. The sharp bang rippled throughout the black stone, sending shivers down every spine who heard it. The whole Vault was silenced. Aimsey jumped back.

Ranboo's glare was as sharp as his weapon's ragged edge. "Do I make myself clear?"

Aimsey didn't say anything, still and speechless. She hung her head.

"Yes, sir," she squeaked out under her breath.

As far as Tubbo knew, no one had ever called Ranboo "sir", least of all in response to an order. Had *he* ever given an order before, anyway?

"Good." The Warden pulled back. "Now, leave."

Aimsey didn't waste a second. She rushed straight past Tubbo without a word and without a single look cast his way. The ram watched her go. She was swift, but shaking.

"Tubbo?"

He turned back. Ranboo's attention had shifted to him. Although his expression had softened, Tubbo still knew the cold ice wasn't far behind.

He put down the basket he was carrying and hurriedly went through the things inside. "So I brought you some meat, fruit..."

A drawing from Michael, not that Ranboo likely cared.

"Tubbo, are you alright?"

"I don't know, are you?"

"What?"

"You know what, don't answer that." He put everything back inside and dumped it on the desk. "Come back home when you've stopped pretending to be someone you're not."

"Pretend to—what do you mean? Where are you going?"

"Michael needs someone in his life. Since you're not going to do anything about it, I have to. And I'm *glad* to."

"You're not staying?"

"For what?"

He didn't wait for an answer and left. Aimsey, who despite her hasty exit had barely set a foot on the Prime Path by the time he caught up to her.

"Hey."

She looked around. As soon as she saw him, her eyes went wide. She picked up her pace.

Tubbo rushed after her and grabbed her shoulder. "Aimsey, hold on."

"I need to go."

"No you don't."

"Tubbo—"

"Did you know about this? About what happened to Sapnap?"

"Leave me alone!"

She managed to wrangle her wrist from his grasp and scamper off, but Tubbo wasn't done yet. Rabbit hybrids were quick, but sheep weren't far off either.

One ten minute sprint and a few powerful jumps from his hind legs later, he was hot on her heels. In a panic, she made the mistake of veering off into familiar territory.

Those who thought they could outrun Tubbo on L'Manberg's own turf was sorely mistaken. Ruined or not, this was *his* country.

He finally cornered her in the ruins of the watchtower and grabbed her by her ears. She squealed, but he held strong and hauled her up to his eyes. Her nose twitched and she fought him at every tug.

"Maybe Ranboo was right," bleated the ram, "maybe you *are* an accomplice! I should turn you in right now!"

"Let go!"

"The prison can hold more than one prisoner, and I'm sure Karl would be happy to get the full picture when he deals out his punishment."

She continued to thrash around more and more violently. "I just wanted to see Eryn and make sure he's alright!"

"So you admit it? You'd do anything for him, even confront the Warden himself? That's what you are, aren't you; a right hand man and a scout! No wonder you ran off so quickly when I mentioned Sapnap's name! This wasn't a random murder, this was a planned assassination!"

"Let...me...go!"

She kicked out behind her.

Shattering stone splintered the confrontation.

The sound echoed all around the watchtower's smooth circumference, bouncing off the walls, pushing against the last few fragments of its second level and roof and disturbing the wildflowers that grew between the cracks.

Time froze in its tracks.

Tubbo let go of Aimsey, mouth dry.

The headstone had split in two.

Tubbo immediately dropped to his knees and rushed to pick up the pieces. His palms rolled against the pebbles, scraping his skin and making his frantic task that much harder to perform. He collected them all in his lap and painstakingly attempted to piece them back together. None of the stones wanted to stay put or stand up anymore, but he persevered.

And he subsequently failed.

He pulled back, struggling to keep his composure.

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Who deserved happiness, and a full marker to his name. Now he had neither.

Tubbo let his head fall against the splintered stone. "Fuck, I'm sorry, Tommy," he muttered under his breath, through teeth gritted so hard he was sure they would shatter just like the headstone did. "I'll fix it, I swear..."

How?

Tubbo could carve a stone, no problem, but he couldn't put Sam's own affection into it, the kind that was materialized by a jagged, careless chip on the edge the perfectionist he had been wouldn't have left if his grief hadn't been as strong as it was. He couldn't recreate Technoblade's brash craftsmanship on the finer details when Sam was too lost and weakened by sobs to finish it properly. He wouldn't be able to replicate the painful evening with Ranboo where they brainstormed epitaphs suitable for their best friend's resting place. He couldn't replace every tear that had fallen on its surface, every handprint that had fondly caressed the carved words or laid flowers upon it.

Tubbo had the skills to build an ornate, ten-foot-tall monument if he wanted to. He didn't have those needed to reconstruct works of the past, nor the memories they bore.

A hand held out another piece of the headstone, and Tubbo looked up.

Aimsey gently placed the fragment into his lap with the others. Tubbo would have lobbed it at her head in retaliation if he had thought it would amount to anything. It wouldn't. He couldn't fix anything—he'd rather not break anything more.

"I didn't mean to—" she began.

He cut her off. "I know you didn't. It was my fault. I shouldn't have done that. Are you alright?"

Aimsey stroked her ears and nodded. "A little sore, but it's fine." She looked at the shattered gravestone. "Who's it for?"

"The greatest hero the SMP has ever known, and my best friend."

"I can make it right; I know how to fix porcelain and stone. Eryn taught me. I could—"

"No," Tubbo answered firmly, shutting her down. "There's no point. Accidents happen."

Accidents, like how Tommy lost all his lives. How Tubbo lost most of his. The wrong place, the wrong time, the wrong actions. All accidents through and through.

Tubbo could never believe that. Death was rarely due to accidents. All those he had witnessed were *very* much intentional, whether it be by the will of a divinity or by a mortal soul.

The recent one that had shaken the SMP was no exception.

"Were you responsible for what happened to Sapnap?"

"No."

"Did you know what Eryn would do?"

"No."

"But you know why he did what he did."

"Yes."

Her confirmation immediately piqued Tubbo's interest. "And?"

"And I can't tell you."

"Can't tell me? What do you mean?"

Aimsey avoided his gaze. "It's not mine to tell."

"But what if it could help pardon him?"

She shook her head. "We both know that will never happen."

"There's a chance."

Again, she declined. "It would only make things worse."

Faced with her reluctance to talk, Tubbo could do nothing but leave. He gathered up the fragments of the broken tombstone and tucked them away beneath a growth of doc leaves. He'd find something to do with them. Until then, Tommy could hang on as "Gen TOM" for a little while.

The fact few visited the site in recent years had at first infuriated Tubbo, but now it reassured him. They wouldn't see the desecrated grave, and they wouldn't think Tubbo had left him to rot.

He didn't think he'd survive having to fight to prove his unshakable love for Tommy.

The thought choked him up. He had to leave before he broke down.

To his surprise, however, Aimsey was the one to crack.

"I just want to see him again," she blurted out, "I need to make sure he's alright... I need to—he's everything to me! I can't leave him in that place..."

She sank to the ground above Tommy's grave, weeping not for him but for her own best friend.

Tubbo couldn't help but find the whole scene so heartbreakingly familiar. The funeral had ended on a high note, but the night had brought the ram crawling back to the freshly dug gravesite and sobbing until the sun rose.

Both him and Aimsey had lost someone dear to them. Perhaps that was enough to put them on the same page.

"Snowchester will always be open for you," he offered. "My home is yours too, as is the rest of the SMP. I can talk to Niki and make sure there's always

a loaf ready for you at the bakery, and fight so Kinoko won't hold anything against you, if they know at all."

Whatever had happened was Eryn's doing. Aimsey shouldn't have been the one to suffer for it.

He wondered how much kindness she had really been shown in her life. When she looked his way, he saw nothing but shock.

"I can't accept, it's too much," she stammered.

"I honestly wish I could do more." In fact, he could. "I can try and get you a visit to see Eryn."

"You'd do that? For me?"

"I'll try my best."

"I broke your best friend's headstone," she pointed out, almost in an effort to challenge him, daring him show his true colours and intentions.

"In your defense, Tommy would probably find that really fucking funny," Tubbo said, chuffing out a slight grin. "He would have probably made jokes about it for weeks."

Aimsey had a nice laugh, as clumsy and airy as she seemed to be. It was good to finally hear it.

"I'll take your word for it," she sighed, then turned a little more serious. "But... why? Why are you doing all of this for me?"

"That's what friends do," he shrugged, amused by her dumbfounded expression. "Why else?"

"I've brought nothing but trouble to this place."

"Well," he laughed, exhausting years catching up once again, "that makes two of us."

Chapter Twenty-Four: All I Ask Of You

Every role Sam had held became a burden in one way or another. The crown of the Southern Lands was not the heaviest he had worn, but it was a close second.

Eyes were always on him, expectations were high and one mistake could have devastating consequences. The stakes were perhaps a little lower than guarding Pandora's Vault had been, but definitely more daunting than ruling the Badlands. Unlike his beloved nation in the SMP, he was running the South virtually alone. Not only that, but he had left his duties to fester too long.

He was confident that staying and taking the throne was the best decision—now he had to show everyone and himself why exactly that was.

The first few days of his reign started out a little shaky.

He hadn't been a young prince, but nearing his forties and thrust into a new life was certainly one drastic way to tip the scales. His first couple of days wearing the crown, he felt he was behaving like a clumsy child. He asked questions many probably deemed dumb and relied heavily on his cabinet's advice rather than his own intuition.

Where had the confidence and capabilities he had held as a simple heir gone? Probably swallowed away along with a lot of other things, such as being called anything but "Your Majesty" or the concept of free time.

His last moment of recreation that he could remember came accidentally one afternoon, when he and Corpse took a walk through the army's quarters and overlooked the squires' training session.

Puffy was there too, watching from the shade of a column. She smiled when Sam approached. He smiled back.

Corpse cleared his throat to catch his attention. "Now, most of our trainees have been preparing for the army since birth. However, as I'm sure you can see, we have a slight impostor among them." He pointed at the fighter closest to them. "I believe that one is yours."

Sam joined Puffy's side and didn't say anything for a while. He didn't interrupt the lesson and simply watched.

Michelle was following every one of her teacher's synchronized lunges with far more enthusiasm than her peers. Her stance was immaculate, her grip on the training baton skilled, and her eye narrowed in unshakable concentration. She vaguely reminded him of another child from years ago. He could almost see the outline of a red phantom by her side, guiding her movements and gleefully bestowing his own courage and valiance upon her.

Puffy must have been thinking the same thing, because when she leaned in, she said exactly what he was thinking; "Tommy would be proud of her."

As would Tubbo, and likely Techno too. Anyone who had playfully taught her to fight in her tender years would have watched her now as delighted as her parents were.

Only Sam felt the small thorn of dread stabbing into his side. There he was thinking he would never have to see children fight again. He would do anything in his now incredible power to prevent that from happening. There was at least *one* moral he could offer his new kingdom.

When the lesson ended, the teacher finally noticed the monarch. He bowed and encouraged the squires to do the same. Only Michelle had enough courage to break the ranks and run up to him, but even she stopped in her tracks suddenly. She gave him a clumsy bow.

Sam bent down to her height and outstretched his arms. "I'm still your Pa, right?"

"You're a king too," she said. She nevertheless took a couple of steps closer.

Sam took the crown off his head. He had quickly learned that the ceremonial headpiece and everyday one were two different things entirely. He put it over her brow.

"And you've always been my princess," he smiled. "Now come here."

Pushing the crown higher to set it around her ears, she wasted no time in leaping into his arms. He hoisted her up and gasped.

He would never cease to be amazed at how big and fast piglins grew. It seemed like only yesterday when she was snuggled against his shoulder as he and Puffy carried her through the blustery streets of Snowchester.

"You're getting heavy," he huffed, surprised to find himself staggering under her weight.

"You're just getting old," Puffy snickered in return, patting his shoulder.

"Nah, I'm pretty sure my little girl is getting bigger," he cooed, nuzzling her as she grunted happily. "Soon I won't be able to pick you up anymore."

"That's not true," Michelle cried, indignant. "Everyone says you're as strong as ten men!"

Sam sighed. "I really need to put that rumour straight..."

"Would you like me to find and deal with the culprit, Your Majesty?" asked Corpse. A blade hissed out of its scabbard somewhere out of his view.

Sam laughed and immediately waved him off. "No need, it's not doing too much harm. Let everyone have their own fun."

He was well aware that notion would be foreign to his grumpy guard captain and military advisor. However, whatever personal reservations Captain Corpse had were soon brushed away in favour of his obedience to the Crown.

The weapon was sheathed once again. "Understood, Your Majesty. We should continue our business."

"I'll be right there."

Sam placed Michelle back on the ground and kissed her forehead, congratulating her once again and telling her how proud he was of her. It was only when he rose again he realized he had barely said two words to his partner.

"I'll see you later," Puffy said, although it was much more of a question than a statement.

"Definitely."

He kissed her hand.

Unfortunately, there was no "later". Things only built up from there, and Sam dearly wished that he had fought for ten more minutes while he could.

Once he was steadier on his throne, the true weight of the royal workload began to creep towards him. First of all, there were all the redstone affairs to go through and put in order. Next, a few outstanding foreign policies and treaties that needed to be revised and renewed. For a week straight, Sam felt like he did nothing but write letters and read lines upon lines of inked parchment and heavy leather books. It wasn't so different from the stacks of paperwork he had to go through once upon a time in the depths of Pandora's Vault.

On top of all that, his advisors also thought it wise to burden him with a full calendar. Receptions, visits, invites and dinners, among many others. They would have been relaxing breaks in his office job if not for the fact that they were all politically inclined in one way or another. After all, the King's

position was new, and new heads bearing crowns always tended to roll for the slightest of things. His reign had to remain secure, no matter the cost.

One of the ways his advisors tried to do it was through the question of marriage. It was brought up only occasionally, but harshly. A list of suitable suitors had been drawn up by his cabinet and he was pressed to pick one. Each candidate boasted as many lavish and over the top titles and prestige as the next.

Sam, however, had never forgotten the reason he had run away from a life of luxury in the first place. He was going to stick by his beliefs in that department, despite the frequent urging.

The question of love was the one and only time he went against his cabinet. They told him he was stubborn, and he in return said they were as blind as bats.

Apparently, calling one particular member of the court "darling" and openly sharing a daughter with her was not enough to get the message across, let alone deter other advances. Some of them, Sam was sure, were genuine. Others probably only did so to claim benefits, including the crown itself.

Sam could see the difference between both, even if others did not. Regardless of the sincerity or lack thereof, he stayed put.

"This is starting to become ridiculous," Boomer tutted out loud to him one day in the gardens. "Just pick one and we'll be done with it."

"I can't do that."

"Why not? You wouldn't even have to see them if you don't want to. Lots of monarchs live separate lives from their spouses. It's a political game, nothing more."

"I am *not* going to marry for convenience," Sam said firmly. "I'll only do it for love, and I already have a partner."

"You mean Puffy?"

"Who else?"

"Are you sure?"

The skepticism in his voice took Sam aback. "I love her with all my heart."

"Have you asked her to marry you?"

The question was abrupt, blunt, and inescapable. It was a simple one that required a simple reply, nothing more.

"No, but—"

"Boomer's right, this is getting ridiculous," huffed Tina, one of the rare people who dared to talk to him like someone of equal standing. He appreciated it immensely. She shoved a bouquet of fresh trimmings in his hands and pushed him towards the shimmering lakeside, where Puffy was sharing pleasantries with a baron and his husband. "Just go over there, pop the question and sweep her off her hooves!"

Sam dug his heels into the gravel, stuttering to a halt. "I can't."

"Can't? Why not?"

That was the question he had been asking himself for the past three years.

He asked it once again that very same evening, and the three others that came after that. Alone in his candlelit study, he worked very little now, instead taking all his time to hold and fiddle with the one thing he always kept on him. It was even more precious to him than the jewel-encrusted crown on his head was.

Why was he so scared?

Why was he so hesitant to make the move?

Every time he came up empty, so he continued to stare in silence.

The ring was growing tired of living in his pocket, rarely seeing the light of day and not even glimpsing the hand he had fashioned it for.

Maybe one day.

The door creaked open.

"You alright?"

He stashed the ring away just in time.

"Yeah." He rubbed the bridge of his nose and feigned pained interest in one of the letters from a duke of the East. "The Ender's just hurting my head a little."

Puffy walked over, closing the door behind her. She glanced at his work, right before kissing his forehead. "Better?"

He sighed. "Better."

"Good."

She settled at his side, running her fingers over the back of his hand, seemingly content with just being there with him.

With a pang of guilt, he realized it had been weeks since he had managed to properly speak to her. He'd wake up way before she did, lock himself away with business matters, and when he'd come to bed late at night she'd already be soundly sleeping. No matter how much his heart begged him to, he never built up the courage to wake her up. He'd cuddle up against her back and wait for exhaustion to take him away. Sometimes, if he was lucky, she'd roll over in his arms, still fast asleep, and snuggle up closer. It made for even more sleepless nights where he'd desperately try to keep himself awake not to miss a second of her presence.

Every night and morning was a gamble. The lingering fear of her deciding to leave haunted him relentlessly. Dependence was an awful thing—choking chains of doom around his very soul—but he was sure his heart wouldn't take it if she left, her and Michelle. He had already felt the blow strong enough the night of their argument.

He wondered if that desperation ever leaked through, and if she loved him any less for it. In the same train of thought, he wondered if the Crown too had played a part, if his absence had sown sour seeds in her mind. If maybe she was regretting staying with him after all, saving face only for their daughter.

"I thought you'd be asleep by now." He wrapped his arms around her waist.

She shrugged, her hands drifting up to his shoulders. "I missed you."

His playful reply was mediocre, at best: "A little?"

"If I said a lot, would that make you feel more or less guilty?"

She had a point.

"I don't know, I don't know anymore..."

He pressed his head into her stomach, his first real, intimate contact with her in ages. Her hands came to thread through his hair. Every gesture was

familiar, homely. He almost fell asleep, until a gust of wind rushed into the study. The work on his desk blew to the floor in waterfalls of paper and ink. He tried to stop them, to no avail, and rushed to close the window.

"I've got it." Puffy began to pick up the papers on the floor.

"Puffy, no—" He violently hit his head on the edge of the desk as he ducked down to help. "*—fuck!*"

"Oh gods!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine..."

His scalp throbbed and he held it, hissing. He could feel a bruise swell under his fingers.

"Shit, do you want me to..." Puffy tentatively reached out to touch it, but he stopped her.

"It'll pass."

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—"

"It's not your fault, it's fine. I'm fine." He didn't cross her eyes. He slumped down all his energy suddenly leaving him. Guilt continued to eat him out. He sighed, fully feeling its weight. "This isn't the life I promised you."

He finally began to truly wonder if all of this hadn't been one big mistake, the greatest misjudgement of his life.

"What *did* you promise me, then?" she asked.

"That I'd love you forever and show it every day."

Absence made the heart grow fonder. It could also severely damage it.

"As far as I can see, that hasn't changed. You kept your word, as did I. I'm here with you, and I'm going nowhere." She still loved him more than ever. He would never understand why. "You look exhausted."

"I'll get to bed soon, I promise."

He got back to his work again, concentrating on the Eastern duke's letter and the Ender cipher in an open book for reference.

"Soon, Sam?"

"Soon."

"How soon is that?"

"Maybe ten, twenty..."

He trailed off, squinting at a jumbled mess of letters. He couldn't tell if it was a dialect, or simply a mark of poor penmanship.

There was a sigh, and the work in front of him was pushed aside. Before long, the nib of his pen was dripping ink onto soft, sheep legs. Puffy made herself comfortable on the edge of the desk, effectively blocking his view.

He leaned back a little, reluctantly putting down one of the papers. "Puffy..."

"This is becoming a repeat of the prison."

He twirled his pen between his fingers and sighed. "This is bigger than the prison. I'm looking after a realm now—"

"And with the prison you were looking after five or six of them at once, and doing it alone. Look what happened."

"It's different this time."

Was it, though?

"I'm actually managing."

She shook her head, and not for the first time he was impressed how she managed to read him like a book.

"When's the last time you took a break?" she demanded.

He stayed silent for a moment or two. "I ate lunch today," he offered in a whisper.

"A *proper* break, Sam."

"I'm fine."

He was being stubborn, and he knew that she didn't like that. He sheepishly apologized with a lopsided smile. She returned it with an unconvinced frown.

It was strange, but that worried grimace that wouldn't take any of his shit made his heart swell. Gods, he had never thought a frown could be so

endearing, offer stars and light to warm him up whereas others like it only brought stormy darkness. He had never loved a show of disapproval as much as he did now. And he realized then that the night would be a very different one indeed. He was ready for it to be.

"I'll leave you to it," she said, slipping off his workspace, "but stop by midnight."

"Why?"

"Because we're going on a date."

With that decision made, she gave him an oddly friendly pat on the shoulder, leaving him a stunned mess.

He spun around just before she left. "Did you just give me an order?"

She looked back, grin growing wider. "And you didn't put up much of a fight when I did, Your Majesty."

The ring burned in his pocket. It was made of molten, hot fire that was suddenly unbearable to keep so close, unused and yearning.

Boomer and Tina were right; his hesitation was ridiculous. A great world of salted water had tried to pry them apart once and now it had dissipated and had nothing to stop him, he still hadn't made a move. There was *nothing* in his way anymore.

He was a king bound by duty, and yet he had never felt more liberated to do anything he pleased.

Sam kept his promise. When the clock struck midnight, he put down his pen and his crown, melting away from his duties. He left his study with nothing but a cloak over his shoulders, the only piece of jewelry the engagement ring in his pocket still clawing at him for release.

It was probably the anticipation which made the night more beautiful.

Or, even more likely, it was Puffy herself.

When he walked out into the gardens, she was the first thing he saw. Pacing up and down one of the alleys, bathed in starlight, brightening up as soon as she laid eyes on him.

"So, what's the plan?" he asked when he came closer.

"No plan, just us."

"Just us, huh? I like the sound of that. So—"

She cut him off by yanking him to her and kissing him deeply.

That single kiss after such a long and difficult drought rushed through him like ambrosia, lingering with sweetness. It left him longing and fiercely addicted to what he had missed.

To her.

He heaved her into his arms and returned her kiss with all the pent-up ardour he had in him.

"You talk too much, sometimes," she murmured, pressing a finger to his lips.

"That's kind of my job now," he pushed out between gulps of air.

"What did I say? Work time is over now, this is for us."

"Yes, m'am. Gods, how did I ever survive without you?" he panted, holding her even tighter.

The month or two of relative distance between them, in hindsight, had been unbearable. Sam was ready and completely willing to make it all up to both of them in one night. The whole world was theirs. They could do anything they wanted, and no one could stop them—no gods, no rules, no crowns and no obligations.

The grounds crawled with dark, flitting shadows that dashed over the paths and through the bushes, and the flowers washed bleakly by the moonlight. Petals that once burst with colour during the day now shone with silver and dark indigos. The statues scattered around glowed like divine apparitions, the paths that criss-crossed around them as bright as rivers made of diamonds and captured clouds. Black leaves shivered against the sky, stars peeking through with curious eyes.

They chatted amongst themselves with giggling whispers, fawning over the couple that basked in their glow. Even the moon spared a look or two, but ultimately remained as noble and austere as she always was.

Sam had never felt lighter than he was then, exploring his own gardens with a careless wonderment only the veil of night could bring, stumbling wherever his feet took him, following the brightest star he had ever seen and had ever adored.

Puffy looked back often, laughing and smiling wider than he had ever seen her do before. Every part of her seemed to glow with an angelic halo, but the strength of her pounding hooves didn't fail to remind him she really was *here*, with him.

How wonderful life was, now she was in the world again.

Every time she slowed down, he couldn't help but pull her in and hug her, kiss her—

Oh gods, how he *loved* her. It made him choke.

"You're hissing again," she whispered to him once, one hand on his cheek and the other against his chest. It was a light touch, but enough to make him want to explode.

"I can't control it," he apologized, "you know that. You know what you do to me."

"So this is *my* fault, then?"

There was no bite to her question; on the contrary, she seemed to be purposely trying to fluster him further. It was working all too well. He was more than happy to play her game. He felt like he didn't have a choice. He wouldn't fight even if he had.

"Oh, absolutely..."

Lines of lights appeared not too far in the distance, marching down the side of the palace. Sam ducked them both behind a marble plinth of a statue, the eyes of Aphrodite watching them carefully, a frozen hand brought up to her neck with a delicate touch.

"Who is it?" Puffy asked in a whisper, close to his ear.

"Seepeekay, probably, or someone else on duty," he replied.

"Why are we hiding? You could just send them away."

"It's just more fun this way. I like the risk—" He trailed his lips across her jaw and lightly down the side of her neck, pulling out breathy laugh after breathy laugh from her. "—so I think we should try and stay quiet, hm? Unless you'd like to awkwardly explain to them what we're doing here."

It was far easier said than done, and Sam knew he wasn't helping the situation. When she was happy and breathless, so was he. No amount of whispered shushes could ever hope to silence them.

A voice from the patrol cut through the magical immobility of the gardens. "Who's there?"

Sam had no idea why the fact it was Corpse made the whole thing even *funnier*.

Puffy had to physically keep him quiet by clapping a hand over his mouth and pulling his head into her hair.

The flowers, the night air, her own light scent of seagrass and wide open landscapes, blue and beauty rolled into one: all of it charmed his senses. He could happily stay there forever.

When the coast was clear, she released him.

He picked and tucked a tiger lily bloom behind her ear.

"Tina's going to kill you if she finds out you've severed the head off one of her children," Puffy warned him.

The bright orange petals burst with golden accents, vibrant and bold against her curls. It looked far, far better on her than it did in the flowerbed he had plucked it from.

Sam leaned in. "Then let me die," he whispered, kissing her deeply once again.

He took her hand and once the patrol's lights disappeared for good, he pulled her out of their hiding place and back into their nighttime playground.

Once the sculpted paths and bushes had been explored, they ventured off into the forest. Somehow, in the velvet, almost complete darkness of the trees where not even the stars managed to peek in, the night grew even more magical.

Bouncing moss and long forgotten paths carpeted the floor, and the impenetrable pine canopy stretched a blanket across the sky, captured warmth whiffing through the tree trunks and enhancing all the fragrant humidity radiating from the damp vegetation. The animals, if there were any, trod softly, and hazy swarms of fireflies poured through the darkness like droplets of golden rain.

The only clues of civilisation and the castle's influence this far in the darkness were the secluded follies—artificial ruins of pavilions, small open-air temples and ornate walls and doorways never used for any purpose except artistic—made of milky-white alabaster and overgrown with climbing ivy. They were the venues for the court's spring garden parties, ephemeral love affairs between the rich and the poor alike, and magical worlds only present in children's minds. Little treasures of purposely crumbling architecture built for prestige and appreciated by intrepid wanderers.

Sam and Puffy spent their time tracking down every single one and frolicking in their majesty, before finally settling down by the lake. The jetty they found on the edge was wreathed with wisteria and lilac blooms around its roofless columns. The floor stretched out partway out, decorative cracks letting them catch glimpses of the water lapping the bank below them.

The lake beyond was the same it always had been in both day and night: smooth, undisturbed, like fine glasswork. It shone no matter if it was the sun or moon who cast their light down, remained tranquil even with the swans gliding across its surface and the carpes thrashing in its depths.

They sat together on a stone bench, so close together they could talk without disturbing the peace, and so close every shift and breath in their body was felt and cherished. Sam was breathless simply being there with her, even when she was deeply concentrated on the small creation she built between her palms.

"Are you okay?" he finally asked her.

"I'm here with you, why wouldn't I be?"

"No, I mean here. In the South, in the court."

The last thing he wanted to hear was that he had shackled her into a life of misery. But she surprised him. She smiled.

"My answer still stands; I'm here with you. That alone makes it easier to adapt to life here than it was back in the SMP. I have a family here, and that's worth everything. Not to mention, but I think your courtiers are starting to come around too. Just the other day some of them asked me to play cards with them."

"Really?"

She shrugged and took his hand, laying it on her lap. "You don't happen to have something to do with that, do you?"

"Me?"

"No proclamations or warnings I haven't heard of?"

"Absolutely not. All of your success is on you."

"You really think so?" She seemed a little unsure.

"How could anyone *not* love you, eventually?"

"I don't know: ask Corpse."

She finally let go of his hand and presented her work to him. A bracelet woven from ivy and purple wisteria flowers hugged his wrist, tied together by a skilled sailor's knot.

He admired it fondly. "I've never had a flower bracelet before," he told her.

"You already have a crown prettier than anything I could ever make," she said as a way of explanation.

"I would give it away without batting an eye if I could have one made by you. In fact, to have *anything* made by you."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"Even The Flag?"

The Flag, the inside joke that had become their shared, teasing nightmare.

"Alright, that might be the ultimate exception," he admitted. "Not even I can lie about that anymore. I'm sure everyone else was too polite to mention it. I think we all appreciated the effort, but gods!—it was *bad*."

"Okay, okay, no need to lay it on."

"Why shouldn't I? It reminds me of the good old times."

"I was right then; you *are* getting old."

An amused rumble built up in his chest and he pushed her down, back against the bench.

"Mind repeating that, darling?" he chuckled darkly.

"If you weren't hard of hearing you would have heard me the first time," she retaliated, sticking out her tongue at him.

Sam didn't even have the time to think of a clever reply before Puffy literally flipped the situation. Slipping out of his hold, she used a few clever fighting techniques that perfectly took advantage of his weak spots and her own strengths. In a matter of seconds, he was down on his back, and she the one looming over him.

"But you won't draw a line at taking a king down with a surprise attack," he pointed out.

"Just like I won't draw the line at calling him old, or my love."

Few in History could ever boast to truly capture a king's full heart and soul.

"You really outdid yourself in the romance department, my darling," he commented, brushing her curls over her ears.

"I believe I have."

Her lips touched his for a moment, a moment he was about to recapture had it not been for the abrupt and loud calls echoing from across the lake. Puffy raised her head and smiled.

"Sam, look at that!"

She leapt off him and ran to the edge of the pavilion, beckoning him to follow. A gaggle of wild geese all as white as snow came hurtling down from the mountain peaks in a perfect arrow formation. The moon rays danced off their wings, gilding them with sparkling water drops that glinted and rolled off their feathers like diamonds. Their grace and elegance was only rivalled by their clumsy landing in the middle of the lake and their shrill honking.

Puffy leaned out further over the balustrade running around the outskirts of the jetty, exactly as if she was trying to stop herself from diving in and joining them. "Are they migrating already?"

"Autumn is coming," Sam remarked, remembering the amber hues that began to curl the edges of some of the oak and maple trees littered around the grounds. "It must have already swept in up in the North."

"It felt like the start of summer just yesterday."

"Time flies when—"

They were having fun? When mourning came knocking? When the whirlwinds of obligations blew in through the front doors?

"—well, it just flies." He looked down. "I promised to make Sylvee some pumpkin pie one day. I never got to..."

Puffy admiration of the geese became soft empathy. "You really miss her, don't you?"

He nodded. "I miss them all. I just wish things had gone differently, and that everyone we love was still here."

"Yeah, I wish they were here too..." She huffed out a small laugh. "Those geese would be gone by now if Tommy had his way."

"He was a damn good shot," Sam agreed. "Tubbo would probably encourage him, so good luck stopping him there."

"I think even Philza would have got in on it all."

"You think? Against fellow fowl?"

"He's always had that chaotic streak, let's be honest. Technoblade wouldn't help either, and neither would Sapnap."

"Ranboo would be in over his head and unable to do anything, probably beg Sylvee to do something about it. She'd just find the whole thing too funny to attempt to stop them."

"And even if she did, Techno would pull out his anarchist ideals and start a scalding political debate about the power of the ruling classes."

Sam laughed, his mood lightening considerably. "Gods, if we got all of them together we'd be constantly babysitting!"

"Oh, the horror," Puffy sighed dramatically. "We most definitely would be, but we'd be happy."

"We'd be happy," he agreed.

Sam cast a look back towards the palace on the distant shore. He could almost picture the faraway but recognizable silhouettes of all those they held dear, even those they hadn't mentioned in their brief back and forth what-if scenario. He would give anything to see even just one of them again; alive, well and happy to see him too.

The night he had devoted to one love soon became about them all. It made him happy as much as it made him sad.

Lives were fleeting. Time was short.

"You know, when I stepped onto that ship with you, I didn't realize how mortal I really was," he confessed abruptly. "It only hit me that same evening, and I panicked. I spent the whole night writing up a bucket list, just in case."

"That's why you were so exhausted the next day," Puffy hummed in realization, the memory apparently as vivid as it was to him and finally putting two and two together. "I thought it was because you were seasick."

"I was scared. The list was long, and I kept adding to it during the three years we sailed around. There were small things on it like vanquishing my first pirate vessel, and bigger ones like finding Blackbeard's lost treasure. A lot of them seemed like nothing but fun. I had so many about you and Michelle; I wanted to see your first reaction to the Old World and finish my first long bedtime story with my daughter, among other things. I just wanted to make the most of what I had left in this world before it killed me. I managed to tick almost everything off, even the most absurd-sounding ones. Hearing the siren's song was one of the last checks.

"One of the last? Almost everything? Have you actually completed it?"

"There's one more thing."

The right moment was finally creeping closer. This was the last stretch. There was no turning back, no dodging it. He could only keep going forward.

This time, he was a hundred percent ready. Well, close to a hundred percent: ninety-nine and a half would be a somewhat more accurate estimate.

"What is it?"

He swallowed hard. "It's, uh, it's something..."

Puffy shuffled a little closer to him. Her eyes were still on the lake. "Do tell."

"It's something that I've had a million chances to do, but not the guts. I think half of me is scared, and the other is telling me I don't deserve it if it goes well."

"Sounds important."

He took the ring out from his pocket, making sure she didn't see. He gazed down at it, hands trembling.

"It's probably one of the most important things I've ever done in my lives."

The sapphire gem shone brighter than it ever had before. The soft moonlight bounced over it, casting vibrant azure shadows over his palm. He had never been in more awe of the beauty of his own craft.

The home stretch.

Just a few more steps.

There would never be another moment like it.

"What is it, then?" she asked. "Come on, the suspense is killing me!"

He took a deep breath. Blood rushed into his ears. The spark struck the bonfire.

"The last thing on my list was to marry the love of my life—"

Sam had never done this before. He hadn't seen a proposal with his own two eyes either, only read about them and heard vague recounts. He would try his best, which was with everything in him.

He turned towards her and dropped down onto one knee.

"—but maybe I don't have to be on the high seas to do that."

Puffy let out a laugh, clearly assuming that it was a passing tease. She looked across to him, just about to joke back. Her eyes landed on his kneeling form, and on what he was holding between his fingers. She took a startled step back.

"Sam, what are you doing?"

"Something I should have built up the courage to do a long time ago."

He had never felt calmer, more collected and sure of himself. Now he was here, it didn't seem so daunting anymore. The timing, at last, was right. It was perfect. As perfect as the night, as the ring, as her.

He managed to find his words—how exactly he managed to do that in his current state was beyond him.

"When people started likening us to lightning and thunder, I thought it was just a tease. A fun nickname for friends and a fearsome one for foes. Then I started to realize that maybe it was more than that. Lightning and thunder are always by each other's side in every storm, no matter what, no matter how feebly it may seem to some. We've been together as friends and partners for so long now, through the best and the worst, and I've never felt more complete. I'm whole when I'm with you, and in a world where everything seems to want to try and cut me into pieces, it's more wonderful and precious than I can say.

I've never felt luckier, to know that I'm the one who gets to see you smile every day. You are the funniest and wittiest woman I have ever met, with a sharp tongue and even sharper thoughts. Your strength and skills are enough to put even the fiercest of heroes and gods to shame, your courage is something worthy of a full army and even more. And your beauty, my *gods*—Puffy, nothing in this world is worthy to so much as *look* at you. The thought that I have gotten to kiss those lips hundreds of times seems almost unfair. You've given me freely what the heavens can only dream of possessing.

On the day we left the SMP, I said I wanted to be with you forever, if you'd have me. You asked me if that was a proposal and I... I didn't give you a straight answer. I should have, because it was. Gods, it most *definitely* was. I wish I had asked you properly sooner. I wish I could ask you a thousand times, just to feel what I do now."

Maybe he should have written something down beforehand.

Beneath his calm and collected surface, he was downright terrified, but he was bursting with love from every part of his body and soul. He wanted to keep this senseless adoration for the rest of his life and far beyond. He wanted to live in love, and the ring he held out to her was only a small part of it.

"I have one life left. Every moment for me is precious, and I want to spend it all with you. If I could, I would rewind Time and spend all *three* of them with you. You are worth my every breath. I lay my heart at your feet, do with it what you will. I am yours, forevermore."

He ended with a choked breath, his tongue thick in his mouth. She still hadn't moved or said anything. She was as quiet as the dormant forest follies and sleeping flowers.

Then, something happened that Sam certainly did not expect.

Puffy laughed.

She took something out of her own pocket, glinting with gold and emerald highlights. Another ring. Sam froze in turn, just as startled as Puffy had been.

Faced with his expression, she looked away briefly and laughed even harder. "You beat me to it," she told him, and he understood what that meant.

His breathing turned heavy, anticipation and gunpowder climbing in his throat and swelling up in his chest.

"Is that a yes, then?"

She threw herself into his arms, knocking everything out of him except his thundering heart.

"Yes, yes, a million times yes!" She pulled away from his shoulder and pressed her forehead against his. "Marry me, Sam. Today, tomorrow, in a week, I don't care! I'm yours and always will be, until my last breath leaves my body, and beyond that. I'll be yours until the sun explodes, the moon falls, Time stops and History is erased for good. Until the end of the Universe."

The moment he slipped the ring onto her finger, and her own onto his, he felt his breath come back to him, trickling in with more and more assurance.

She admired it and the way it perfectly fit her hand. It was made for her, quite literally. "It's beautiful."

"Then it was definitely meant to be yours, darling." He kissed her temple.

Her eyes sparkled so much brighter than the sapphire gem. His own ring glinted with a deep green hue, grounded like forest roots and clinging moss in the underbrush. It was just as beautiful, just as precious. It was the same question as his own. Asked and delivered differently, but the same question nonetheless.

It seems like they had both been hesitant enough to pop it, cautious of the heartbreak that could have followed had it gone terribly.

Yet they both gave the same answer.

"Did you really think I'd say no?" she asked, reading his mind.

He shook his head, still somewhat dazed. "I... I didn't know what to think. There was always a chance you would."

"A chance that I'd refuse you? You, the one who saved me on my first day in the SMP; you, my best friend through thick and thin; you, the man who doesn't hesitate to give up everything for what he thinks is right and to help those he loves?"

As she spoke, she stood up and pulled him up with her. She knocked her head against his, reaching up on the tips of her hooves.

"You, who cared for children who had no one else there for them; you, a genius who uses his skills for good whether it be in redstone or as a ruler; you, the one who stole my heart and outright refused to give it back?"

He let out a snort at the last remark, emotion rising within him. Tears welled up in his eyes. He had promised himself he wouldn't cry, but how could he not?

"I almost lost you to Death, to the ocean and to our own silly arguments. I would rather lose my last life before I'd let you go again. I don't want much, just for you to say that you'll stay by my side and that you need and want me by yours."

Sam couldn't hold it in any longer.

He broke down, sinking back to the ground and taking her with him.

His forehead slipped from hers and down to her shoulder. Puffy held him closely, soothingly.

He didn't even know what he was crying about, really. Joy regarding the proposal, sadness with the thought that none of their old friends would be here to see it, pure and utter adoration towards her, or maybe even simply the built-up pressure of everything finally culminating and bursting—it was a tangled mess, the lot of it.

"Just say you love me, Sam, that's all I ask of you."

He said it a million times in the hours that followed. Emphatically, repeatedly. As he cried in her arms, as she comforted him and dried his tears with caresses and kisses alike, as they lingered by the lake and reflected a little longer, as they ventured back down their hidden paths to the castle hand in hand, still inseparable, and as the pink dawn rose behind the misty mountains.

He didn't remember all he had professed to her in the hours after their excursion beneath the moon. He doubted she did either, her eyes turning bloodshot and glazed in the light of the rising sun and her eyelids drooping.

They still looked so beautiful. *She* was so beautiful. There had to be a catch, somewhere. There was no way this was happening. After all he did, he was allowed to be happy, well and truly happy, and love dearly.

As he held her in his arms, not quite awake and not quite asleep himself, he realized that maybe the fairytales he had loved so as a child and the romantic ballads he privately idolized as an adult were right.

Love found a way, always and forever.

Chapter Twenty-Five: High Flying, Adored

To fill the days between work, the palace staff gossiped about everything and nothing.

Baroness X has a frightful new hat, one of the footmen would comment.

I saw the Duke of Y and the Viscount of So-and-So sneak off together last night, a gardener would giggle. *Either they're plotting a murder or up to something else, if you know what I mean...*

The new king's very good looking, a young squire would remark, *do you think I've got a shot?*

And the cook would reprimand them for their foolishness and fantasies, and chase them away from the steaming platter of cream buns.

The maids in particular were known to be exasperatingly addicted to the latest stories and court secrets. Affectionately but privately nicknamed "the Gaggle" among the rest of the staff, they spent their days squawking in little groups and not doing much else. If a story was blown out of proportion, they were probably the culprits, and their conspiratory chatter would turn to indignant honks as they tried to pin blame on one other. They were as thick as thieves in their gossiping circles, but otherwise wouldn't hesitate to sell each other out for a grain of corn.

Because of their seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy, the housekeeper took it upon herself to wake them up early and send them to clean the fireplaces—a task which, of course, was met with childlike winging and feeble excuses. Each one was sent to a different room, excluding occupied bedchambers, and expected to finish up before the court woke up and began to amble around the corridors.

Only one of the maids didn't mind her own daily assignment.

Every time she would enter the study, King Samuel would already be up and at his desk, working. The fire would already be lit, giving her the early morning off. The King would greet her with a warm smile too and talk to her. She only really saw him for a few minutes each day, but already he knew and cared a lot more about her life and family than her other colleagues did.

She was probably also the only one to have seen him so unlike a monarch. It seemed like early mornings weren't kind to royalty, either. Oftentimes, he wasn't properly dressed and his eyes were ringed with deep bags, blinking back exhaustion and still trying to shake off sleep.

It was the only morning secret she kept to herself and herself alone.

She knew that many of the nobles would kill for the same luck she had—a few more literally than others.

But that morning, he wasn't in his study, and for the first time she was actually forced to clean out the hearth and light it.

Contrary to her usual obligations, she decided to go and knock on the King's door. Maybe he was still asleep and needed a wake-up call or worse, maybe he had fallen sick and needed help.

She knocked once, and received no reply.

She knocked twice, same thing.

She didn't even bother a third time, and pushed the chamber door open.

She was taken aback to see the room full of sunlight and fresh air, as if the curtains and windows hadn't been properly closed all night. No one lay in the bed.

The only life to be seen were the the two figures sitting by the window, their backlit silhouettes forming one shadow. They were drowsily enlaced around one another, completely still save for their slow, synchronized breathing and lazy touches.

The King was one of them. The second figure, the maid knew mainly from the rumours running around court, some more flattering than others. It was the housekeeper who stepped in and silenced the staff for good.

All of it is defamation, she exclaimed, berating all of the servants under her care. Even if she was a vagabond, she treats us well, like people and friends,

unlike some of your "reliable sources" in the higher circles. I will not tolerate any bad-mouthing at her expense, do I make myself clear?

To be fair, that was the first time the maid actually listened to the housekeeper. Watching Captain Puffy from afar, she could definitely believe that she wasn't *bad*. However, she certainly hadn't expected to see her in the King's arms so early in the morning, so blissfully relaxed and so obviously intimate with him.

It came as somewhat of a surprise, to be sure; she had always pinned King Samuel to be a reclusive ruler who would have no time for any kind of relationship.

The Captain rolled over in his arms and rested her hand on his shoulder. As she began to softly stroke down the length of his arm, the maid saw something glitter on her ring finger.

From afar, it looked like a diamond.

The King seemed to have one as well—that she was *certain* he hadn't worn before.

The maid quickly left and closed the door, then took off down the halls, leaving behind black trails from her pail of soot. She rushed up to every living soul she saw, no matter their role or rank, and blurted out the extent of what she saw.

It went from a full on description of her morning to one simple exclamation that sparked its own slew of queries and theories.

The King is engaged!

It took only half an hour for the whole palace to find out, and even less than that for Michelle to come barrelling into the royal bedchamber, breathless and ever so loud.

"Is it true?" she asked, practically screaming with excitement.

Puffy's head pounded like a hammer, as hard and as painfully as if she had spent the whole night drinking. It wasn't too far from the truth, although her drunken and tired state was due to something even more wonderful. The dawn chill still stubbornly clung to her skin and Puffy instinctively shuffled closer to Sam for warmth.

"Is what true?" she asked, confusion muddling her mind.

"Is it true you're getting married?" their daughter asked, her eyes glued to her mother's new ring.

Sam stirred with the same groan and twisted expression Puffy had woken up with. He rubbed his eyes and yawned, before crossing Puffy's gaze. The exhaustion was there, but it was overtaken by a gentle, blissful stare that only reminded her that despite their dreamy haze, every part of it was real. It seemed like he had been only vaguely listening in.

"Is the word out already?" he muttered, tipping his head back against the window frame. "Gods, news travels fast..."

"I knew it!" Michelle gleefully let out a cry of delight and threw her arms around Puffy's neck. "Best news ever!"

Her heart swelled and she hugged her daughter close to her, still caught in Sam's own arms. His and her eyes met over the little piglin's head and she leaned in, unresisting, for a kiss that made her soul sing.

"Ew, that's gross!"

Michelle wriggled out of Puffy's hold and out from beneath them, escaping onto the tiled ground of the sunlight balcony behind them.

In defiance, Sam laughed and kissed Puffy again. "I thought you said it was 'the best news ever'," he smirked.

"Still!"

She made a retching noise, and Puffy couldn't help but laugh. Upon seeing how her mother glowed, Michelle's tune changed yet again.

"Can I tell Seepeekay?"

Sam sighed, giving her a wave of defeat. "Since the whole kingdom probably knows at this point, go ahead."

Michelle gave them each another hug and ran off. Like the maid before her, she relished in telling the world.

"Our first congratulations," Puffy noted, once more falling back against Sam and tucking the end of his cloak around her back.

"Let's hold out for a few more to come, hm?" He stroked her back and sighed dreamily. "But I don't think that will be a problem."

"Oh yeah?"

"Why should it? You are everything anyone could ever dream of. My darling, my queen—"

He stopped himself. Puffy tensed up in surprise. They shared a look.

"You're going to be my queen," he breathed.

The implication that would come with their tied knot had been the last thing on her mind. Now it was here, she couldn't shake it off. The sweet nickname had turned into a reality.

Queen.

"What... what do we do?"

Puffy looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I don't want to drag you into this if you don't want to." He groaned. "I should have thought this through, I should have asked you first. I should have realized and... shit! Gods, I'm so stupid!"

"What *can* we do, except prepare?"

"For what?"

"For the throne."

Her response visibly shocked him, and he remained frozen and quiet. She matched his expression with a confident nod and gaze.

He still stuttered when he asked her; "But do you want it? Really?"

That was another question for another time.

For now, she would happily live in the moment with him, her fiancé. She would be lying if she said she hadn't often thought of him as such, even before she bought the ring he now wore.

They spent another hour or so lounging in each other's presence and catching a few winks of fleeting sleep before finally getting up and making themselves a bit more presentable.

Sam soon became the King again, however this time Puffy was publicly on his arm.

She hadn't known what to expect when they stepped out into the hall and began to walk down the length of the palace. It definitely was not the sudden tidal wave of change.

Barely anyone said anything aloud, but the whispers were numerous enough to get the gist of what the palace as a whole thought.

Surprisingly, many seemed more than on-board. They congratulated the happy couple as they passed, wishing them well. They praised Sam for his decision and welcomed the queen-to-be with bows, curtsies and a whole other assortment of compliments. What they had assumed to be a passing fling for their monarch had ended up being a lot more, and those who were of the skeptic crowd apologized softly to both of them for their past assumptions.

Others still berated her, openly wondering what possessed the King to propose to not only someone of lower breeding than themselves, but to a sailor no less. Some still dared call her a pirate, even after the word was unofficially banned from meetings of polite company. A lot of the negativity, however, stemmed not from hatred or suspicion but rather flashes of jealousy. Unsuccessful suitors to the King gave her the side-eye, envying how she had managed to wrap Sam around her finger with none of the riches and lavish gifts they had.

Most the guards too seemed to have changed their tune, showing their marks of respect to *both* of them, not just one. Suspicious eyes lingered no longer and grips on spears and swords didn't tighten as she passed by. Puffy could breathe freely.

Almost freely. Some minds could clearly never be changed.

They crossed paths with Corpse somewhere in the western wing. He marched up to them with a decided pace, and spoke to the King as if Puffy wasn't even there.

"Your Majesty," he began with a scowl, "may I offer you a word of advice?"

Sam smiled. "No, you may not."

And they moved past, both turning a blind eye to the guard captain's disapproval. It was quickly cast aside for good when friendlier faces came to see them throughout the day.

"Oh my gods, *finally*!" Tina huffed, admiring their rings. "I was beginning to lose hope in both of you!"

Seepeekay was next. He had undoubtedly already been told the details by Michelle, but in his eyes they could still see the same unbridled excitement and joy.

And finally, there was Boomer, waiting from them at the bottom of a stairwell.

"I hear congratulations are in order," he grinned with a delighted croak. When they reached him, he took Puffy's hand and left a slimy kiss on the back. "I want you to know that I'd prefer to serve under you than anyone else, Your Highness. You look beautiful today, by the way."

"Alright, don't rub it in," Sam chuckled. "She's *my* fiancée after all."

"I wouldn't dare," the advisor assured in return. A moment later, he snapped back to business. "Right, now there's no time to waste. As soon as I found out about your engagement, I got straight to work..."

Maybe it was because she had barely slept all night. Maybe it was the speed with which Boomer reeled off the items on a list that was incredibly detailed for one he had only just recently drawn up. Maybe it was the hit that she was about to truly step into a world she only knew the basics of.

Whatever the case, the moment he began to talk, she was lost. Words were thrown around, all talks of meetings and balls and a sudden question about their clothing sizes before casting that aside in favour of reeling off a list of suitable tailors for the job. It was a whirlwind. She was breathless and exhausted just listening to him, nevermind trying to catch up as he sped down the corridor.

Sam must have been thinking the exact same thing.

"And here was me hoping we'd have a little celebration on the beach."

At first, she wanted nothing more.

The turbulent waves that came with her newfound status were fierce, fluctuating between calm and rocky when she least expected it. She even lost her footing once or twice, but always found it again with a dexterity that astounded all those who saw the stumbles.

She was now flying high, welcomed in places she had never thought she'd reach in a million years, called titles she would have never imagined she'd bear one day, and above all arm in arm with someone who loved her more than she had ever thought anyone could.

For someone on top of the world, however, the view was still not exactly clear.

She was no longer just a disposable part of the court. She attended audiences and stuck by Sam's side throughout the day, taking part in his long list of duties and watching how things were done. She never truly realized how good a ruler he was until she saw it all in detail and in practice. It was more than just cabinet meetings and mountains of paperwork.

She visited the mining operations and the construction site for a redstone workshop, one that if successful would grow into an academy. Plans for harbour renovations and expansion were mapped out by the shoreline, all based on suggestions brought forward by Puffy herself in her first ever cabinet meeting that morning. All the advisors, bewildered, had signed off on it almost immediately.

When farmers near the Western border reportedly rose up against the new monarchy and stopped their flow of crops to the rest of the land preparing for winter's hard fall, Sam didn't send the army. He went to confront them himself, and prove to them all that he was worthy of his crown. For a week straight, Sam and Puffy lived and worked alongside them, gaining trust and loyalty. Sam showed his true colours, free from fine silks, cloaks, and twisted words carried from mouth to ear. They also managed to unearth the problems faced by the rural population, and brainstorm effective ways of solving them on site.

If the SMP had anything to show for it, Puffy had always thought uprisings ended in bloodshed and year-long wars. The one in the South's countryside was quenched in less than two weeks and without a single casualty to show for it. There was no oppression needed, simply a humble state of mind and a truthful disposition. It paid off well. They won the farmer's respect, and more besides.

Their past had shown them both the rights and wrongs of man and beast, the impulses and corruption that tore empires apart and irreversibly ruined lives. In the way he handled the farmer's rebellion, Sam showed he would fight tooth and nail to make sure another nation didn't fall into similar clutches.

His people loved him for that, and Puffy finally and completely understood why he had chosen to take the crown.

It was enough to make her fully accept it when her time would come, too.

The final "rite of passage", as both her and Sam had affectionately named the chaos, took the form of a diplomatic journey to the three surrounding

nations. At first scheduled for the King alone, it soon became about them both—the inauguration of the two new monarchs of the realm.

They started off up in the North, where King Wisp received them with all the warm-hearted kindness he was so known for in the South. He gave belated condolences for the loss of the late Queen, knowing full well the letter he had sent had been swept up in the dark sea of grief that had followed. He and Sam picked up the friendship where Sylvee had left it off. The rest of his kingdom managed to fall for the charms of the future Queen of the South quickly, acclaiming her when she so much as stepped outside. Sam teased her with the thought that she could probably do anything she wanted and everyone would still only see her the good in her. King Wisp's reign was perhaps one of the most stable ones. He was young, healthy and strong—peaceful enough to soothe any tensions, yet still fierce enough to fight if the need came to be. Puffy's presence alone had strengthened their bond with probably one of the most powerful allies the South could get.

"Your fiancée is a phenomenal asset to your reign, Your Majesty" their ambassador in the North remarked. "The people love her."

If that was true, then she knew why. The very thing some nobles disregarded her for earned the unquestionable loyalty of entire countries.

"I guess a simple start in life can amount to great things."

However, it seemed like trump card of hers only worked in certain places and with certain people. Their next stop in the West didn't quite go quite as smoothly.

Their ruler had changed again—no surprise there—but with it came the riots in the streets. They were directed at all and nothing at once, and visiting royalty was an easy target for them to push on a mess of ideals that seemed to constantly contradict each other. Corpse and the travelling guard flashed their blades in the rowdy crowd's faces to clear a safer passage. Puffy's own hand reached for her cutlass, but Sam stopped her.

"We're not here to cause problems. We can't be seen drawing our own blades."

His own hands lingered nowhere near his own trident, and Puffy reluctantly listened to him. In the end, she was glad she did.

The first signs of tension came on the palace's steps, where the Western King and the Southern King disputed the incident in the city. Sam justified that his soldiers had drawn weapons with reason and reminded him there were no casualties whatsoever; their host scolded them all the same, turning

a blind eye to his own people's fury. The week they were supposed to stay there became no more than three days, and Puffy was glad for it.

The Western court was a hive of hornets ready and rearing to sting all those stranger to them. They questioned Sam's claim to the throne. They called Puffy names when she thought she wasn't listening, things no one would dare call the sewer vermin. They equated her to anything degrading enough to be passed off as a joke if confronted, but still sharp enough to hurt.

Only the Queen Mother, still living in the Western palace despite the turmoil revolving around it, welcomed them warmly. In the midst of all the horrors she had seen with her siblings, children and friends alike murdering each other for the throne, she found comforting words for the Southern visitors. The three days weren't as bad as they could have been, but Puffy was beyond glad to cross the border again.

Understandably, when they travelled East, she had her doubts, but Sam was there to assure her that everything was alright.

She hoped he was right—and it seemed like he was.

The East, being the most neutral of the four realms, greeted them with heartfelt respect. She started off well in the numerous dukedoms (or "empires" as the regions were known in the East), and their respective rulers seemed satisfied with her—not in the South's interest, but in a more humane approach regarding Sam himself. Both of them were obviously in love, and that was all that appeared to matter. However, not everything was so strictly informal: a ball in their honour had been organized regardless in one of the empires, Gilded Helianthia, and was light-hearted attempt at a diplomatic gathering.

The only incident there that arose didn't directly involve the East.

Puffy walked out onto the lavish walkway running around the walls of the manor, topped with a glass dome which seemed to change pastel colours, capturing a sunrise during a sunset. A heavy crystal chandelier was suspended from the center. It overlooked the foyer where the ball was taking place, the ebony floor already hidden by the sheer amount of guests. She leaned against the railing, attempting to pick out Sam in the crowd below. She saw him sharing pleasantries with the gathering's host, Duchess Pearl of Gilded Helianthia, and an elven duke shining like a bright star in silver and cyan robes, Duke Scott of Rivendell.

Puffy had learned to memorize all the names and faces she encountered. She was proud to see she was doing quite well, especially when it came to differentiating between the Eastern dukedoms and their rulers.

"Don't look down, it's a long way to fall."

Puffy turned around.

Corpse stepped out from behind a pillar, his pelt blending in perfectly with the shadows that cloaked him.

"High flying, adored, engaged to a powerful king and living in the lap of luxury, all in less than four months. Did you ever imagine in your wildest moments that everything you could have ever wanted would be yours?"

His tone was smooth and sickly sweet like caramel, sticking on every word and twisting what would have been praise into contempt.

Puffy wasn't scared of him, not anymore. She held her head high as she addressed him. "Is that a crime?"

"Not a crime, just suspicious. I have been in service my entire life, and I've seen countless royal wannabes with stars in their eyes crash and burn. What makes you think you're any different than them? What happens now, where do you go from here? I doubt all of the gods would be happy to see a pirate sitting on a divine throne."

"I'm not doing this for power," she snapped back. "I'm doing it for Sam. When you love someone, you make sacrifices. You'd know that if you had a heart."

"So that's what this all is to you, a favour game with a lover?"

"I want my family to be safe, and I want to help others do the same. I know I can make the South a better place by his side. We both gave up a life for each other, and now we're here together against all odds. If a god doesn't want me on the throne, they'd better smite me."

"Wishful thinking," he purred, almost amused.

In a matter of time, she would be queen. He had to understand that.

"On her deathbed, Queen Sylvee made you promise to protect Sam and everything he holds dear." She squared up to Corpse. "He loves me, so you will honour that bargain despite your personal sentiments, is that understood?"

Corpse's amber gaze didn't flinch or waver. He too seemed to be unafraid of her. He bowed with difference.

"Spoken like a true queen."

It was neither an insult, nor a compliment.

High flying, adored. It was good to hear, although unimportant in the long run.

If the gods truly did not want her where she was—in touching distance of a crown of her own, a ring on her finger and no longer on the sea—then why had luck been on her side almost every step of the way?

All the time, she had been stuck in the right place, at the perfect time. Washed up on the SMP in time to build a life there and fight for it, anchored in the South in time for Sam to reclaim what was his. She had tried to imagine what life would have been like for everything and everyone she loved had it all gone differently.

But there, dancing with Sam, snug in his firm hold, she realized that Fate had always been kind in one way or another.

"What's on your mind?" Sam asked.

She smiled. "Nothing," she sighed, resting her head on his chest. "Everything's perfect."

No one could fill her place in History's narrative like she could.

And no-one could ever guard the Vault as sternly as Ranboo could.

His time in the prison had warranted some reflection on his part, and one of the conclusions he had come to was this: Sam had been a weak Warden.

What had he really had that made him such an asset, apart from creating the prison itself? Oh sure, he had the redstone knowledge, the physical strength and an imposing figure, but what else, really? In essence, he had been all-show and no substance. The right word would have probably been "wet". A nasty one would have been "pathetic".

One small mistake sent him reeling, one heartbreak keeping his guard down. What kind of competent Warden would hear the confessions of a criminal and decide *not* to lock them up, as he had failed to do with Ranboo? How Dream had been allowed those visits, leading to how he eventually managed to escape? Sam's own sense of self had failed him.

Ranboo could see that now.

His mistake had been to not truly *breathe* with his creation, to live within it as one. No, instead Sam's true loyalties had lain beyond the obsidian, out in the sun of the SMP. That was his mistake.

Ranboo didn't make it.

He devoted body and breath to Pandora's Vault. Life beyond was a vague mirage. He went out occasionally, sure, but the shores of the SMP were no longer so familiar to him. Every face that crossed his way looked at him with unfamiliar, bewildered stares, and as far as Ranboo was concerned that made them all strangers to him.

The search—*the need*—for justice was suffocating. He was drowning in it, reaching for it blindly. He was thirsty and when need found a will, it eventually found a way.

That way was just like what he had learned to become—precise, straight to the point, unapologetically harsh.

The Warden marched into the holding cell, waking up the prisoner with a start.

"Why did you kill Sapnap?" he demanded.

The fireborn staggered to his feet. "What makes you think I'd tell you?"

An answer truly worthy of a heartless criminal. Ranboo would feel no regret with what was to come.

A water droplet ran down the side of his harpoon and dripped onto Eryn's arm. He let out a small yelp of surprise. The new scar on his forearm was small, but visible enough. It could be passed off as a dark birthmark to those who didn't know better, and no one would.

What was happening would remain between the Warden and his prisoner inside the rumbling cradle of Pandora's Vault.

No one else needed to know.

Ranboo kicked the pail he had brought in with him. "Come here," he ordered.

Eryn didn't move.

"Are you deaf? I said, come here!"

There was no use in second chances. Ranboo forcefully yanked Eryn up by the front of his shirt and threw him down where he wanted him. A cry let him know that he had probably grated some palms or broken a finger as he did.

If the gods had a problem with how he treated a murderer, they'd let him know themselves. If they were too much of a bunch of cowards to do so, then that was their fault.

"Hands out."

Eryn still refused to move a muscle. Ranboo lifted and cuffed them himself. He slipped the tip of his harpoon between the link and used it to tug the prisoner closer.

"Here's what's going to happen; you are going to tell me everything I want to know. Is that understood?"

"Or what?"

Ranboo kicked the bucket again. The freezing water rippled in perfect concentric circles.

Eryn snorted. "You don't have the guts."

Ranboo had known many people who seemed like they wouldn't have the guts to do things they eventually did. Life was surprising in the most macabre ways.

He plunged his harpoon into the depths of the pail, taking Eryn's arms with him. The fireborn screamed, deafened only by the rushing waters crashing around the rest of the building. No one outside the prison would be able to hear the yells, not even the almighty gods themselves. The prison was the Warden's domain and the Warden's domain alone. He was his own master. Everything inside would bow to his will no matter how brutal their submission had to be.

He pulled his harpoon out. The immediate screams stopped, replaced instead by gasping breaths.

"No guts, huh?"

When Erin tried to wriggle away, Ranboo locked him in between his legs, digging his shinguards so deeply into his ribs one more hard squeeze would split them entirely. The prisoner would have probably been thankful for the death. Eryn's arms were flaking with fragments of charred skin. The burnt stench was nauseating, and Ranboo's face covering did very little to hide it.

"You can't do this," the fireborn panted. "I'm Kinoko's problem, not yours. You can't kill me."

"It's been four months, six days, three hours and fifteen minutes, what makes you think they're coming for you now?"

He plunged his arms in again. Eryn screamed. Those cries would have made him squeamish once—no longer. If it was that easy to torture a villain, he wondered why no one did it more often. So much could have been solved so easily. However easy the moralities were to ignore, the screams were decidedly a lot less. His head began to ring.

"I'll stop when you tell me what I want to know."

All the fireborn could do was cry. Smoke rose out from the water, the cloud getting thicker by the second.

"You can make this stop. Answer my questions."

"|—"

"Answer me!"

"It burns!"

"It burns..."

Ranboo wrapped the bandage around his son's arm. "And that's why little Nether-born piglins need to wear a raincoat when they go up to watch the lightning, isn't it?"

Michael's eyes widened. "But you're not from the Nether."

He smiled. "But water doesn't hurt any less."

The screams stopped, the agony so great Eryn passed out.

Ranboo yanked him out, released him from the handcuffs and dropped him from his grasp. As the limp body fell to the floor, Ranboo stood well away. He kicked away the bucket. The water poured away, sinking into the cracks and the obsidian floor. Ranboo couldn't stomach the sight, and everything he

blamed the last Warden's failure on came to plague him in turn: empathy, heart, outside love and humanity.

It's hurt him badly and he suddenly resented everything around him. What had he done? What had the Vault done to him? What had he done to himself?

Faces he had almost forgotten re-emerged with twisted expressions. Niki and Eret were worried, Tubbo was cold and virtually unreadable, Michael was scared.

Then came the ones he could only imagine.

Tommy shared Tubbo's coolness, although he was far less reserved to show it. Philza and Technoblade were disappointed, the piglin in particular. It was as if everything he had tried to teach Ranboo had been ignored. Ergo, Techno had failed as a mentor—

No, no he hadn't.

Sam couldn't even look at him, unable to watch as Ranboo walk down the same path as he had, reopening an old wound and reawakening the one monster that tarnished both their legacies.

And finally, Sapnap, or rather his voice.

Rage and revenge never mix well. Revenge is sweet without being fattening, but anger burns and it makes it bitter. Trust me, I know.

Of course, it wasn't really his voice, simply a reflection of Ranboo's own realizations. It didn't pain him any less.

"You have a kid, don't you?"

Eryn had woken up. He flexed his hands a few times, cracking the burnt crust. Flakes fell to the floor, the fiery flesh underneath glowing with a dark orange hue.

"I've seen him, he looks sweet. You must love him a lot, and Tubbo too."

"Are you threatening me?" Ranboo pushed out, teeth gritted.

"No, I just want to make you understand. Imagine if you did everything for Tubbo, going as far as risking your own life. Imagine if he promised you the world in return—and then he turns around and betrays you, costing you everything. Your freedom, your future, two of your lives, all gone just like

that. All of that is replaced by years of torture, imprisonment, a life even worse than the one you tried to run from. If that ever happened to you, how would you feel?"

Ranboo said nothing.

"If you understand that, you'll understand why I killed Sapnap."

With the Warden still watching him, Eryn began to peel off the rest of the black char, almost as if he was used to it. It revolted Ranboo just to look at it, but his heart was still beating furiously against his ribcage, his stomach churning and his head playing Eryn's cries again, and again, and again...

He needed air. He needed to get out of the prison.

He rushed to disperse the rushing water curtain and call the moving bridge back to him. Now he could see a little clearer, he recoiled at the blood stained stone that came jerking towards him, stained by a stomach wound oh so long ago.

A horrifying reminder of what the Vault could do to its guardians.

"Your rabbit friend wanted to visit you. I'll let her. First and only favour."

Ranboo left in a daze before he could be thanked, if at all.

That night, he returned to Snowchester and curled up beside Tubbo. Neither of them asked the other any questions, or gave answers.

Except for one small exchange.

"Tubbo, I can trust you, right?"

He needed to know he could rely on someone other than himself.

He had his head buried in his lap, and looked up at him. The ram gazed down, all the frustration built up in his eyes over the past few months falling away in a few seconds.

"Yeah," Tubbo replied softly, running his fingers through his hair, "you can."

Chapter Twenty-Six: Always And Forever

If Puffy was Sam's fiancée, then insomnia was his relentless lover.

It didn't take no for an answer and deemed it suitable to bother him every other night, jolting him awake and demanding his presence. It started trying to seduce him way back when he guarded Pandora's Vault, keeping him company during long shifts and making him grumpy and cold during the day, and hadn't exactly stopped since.

Over the years, it had softened a little, although it still teased him. Perhaps there was also a sliver of jealousy involved.

On the night preceding his own wedding, Sam barely managed to sleep at all.

He knew how to deal with sleeplessness relatively well, usually. He'd spend the restless hours reflecting, working or taking some much needed breaks.

That night, Sam went to the library and read a random book. He didn't remember the title and got bored of it half-way through. He then sat alone beside the fire, gazing into the flames. He even went out into the gardens for a brisk walk.

Nothing seemed to work to either banish nor distract him, and when that happened there was only one person he could count on.

The light was on when he got to her room. She was still awake, for some reason.

He knocked lightly. "Puffy?"

"Sam? What are you doing here?"

"I can't sleep."

Something inside was put down—a hairbrush or a book—and hoofsteps came towards the door. The handle lowered.

Sam stopped it. "You don't have to let me in. I just want to talk to you."

"It's warmer inside."

And comfier too, he had no doubt. He shook his head, not that she could see him do so. "I'm fine out here."

"Bad luck to see the bride before the day, huh?"

"You could say that. I just... I like hearing your voice."

He sank down to the floor, his back to the door. On the other side, he heard her do the same. He could almost feel her through the wood, her spine curved against his, her head resting back against his own. In the silence, their breaths found each other and shared a rhythm.

In the hectic month or so building up to now, he had been gnawed by stress to the bone. This was the first time in ages he felt completely washed of it, and was tranquil. Everything hung in perfect suspension, from his anticipation to the dimly burning chandeliers above his head, and the stars outside. Anything could happen. The anticipation was palpable. Sam felt like he was floating.

"So, this is what it feels like to be so close to eternity."

Forever, in touching distance. One more dawn, one more day and they would finally obtain it for good. This night would be nothing but a distant memory before long. Its lasting trace would remain as a high he had never felt before, nor he would ever be able to replicate again.

"It feels a little lonely," Puffy replied.

Her hand searched for his underneath the crack in the door, and he let her find it. It were still small in his, and he would have seen it as comical if it wasn't so beautiful. Her fingers were icy despite the apparent warmth of the chamber beyond. Going in did sound appealing, on second thought. He almost asked her to open up properly.

"It is, a little," he admitted, "but you're here, that's all I need to know."

"Is there something you wanted to tell me?"

Oh, right.

"I've been thinking about all of this and..."

"Oh gods, are you getting cold feet?"

She was laughing. It was a joke, despite how scandalized he was when it was mentioned.

He tried to laugh along too, although it was far weaker. "No, not at all. I was thinking about politics."

"Sounds festive."

"I think we should share the crown between us, equally."

"Skiving off work, are we?"

"No, not at all. I just think it won't be fair to leave you in the dust. You are just as capable as me to rule, maybe even more so, and I won't have anyone undermine you for it."

"You trust me enough to do that?"

"I trust and love you more than enough to do it, I just need to know if you'd *want* to."

For a second there, he felt like he was back on the evening of his proposal to her; the same anxiety only rose higher, crammed beneath the painted ceilings of the palace.

"And I trust and love you more than enough to accept it," she finally replied.

It reassured part of him, at least. He didn't know which one exactly, as all were blanketed with worry and exhaustion. He should have celebrated a little more, or maybe he was just calmly content with what he had. What he was *going* to have. The night still felt relatively young, and the oncoming dawn centuries away.

"I've never married anyone before," he blurted out, immediately realizing what a dumb thing it was to say.

Stupid or not, Puffy seemed to love him in all his states—even if she got a worthwhile laugh out of it regardless. "Neither have I," she replied, playing along. "Seems like it's a new experience for both of us."

"Just like falling in love was."

"I read somewhere that a myth claims you fall in love three times, one for each life."

"Myth?"

"It sounds fake, but there have been too many records of it being true to ignore. They say each one brings something different. First love is intense, but childish. Second love seems perfect at first glance, and when you look through rose coloured glasses all the red flags around you look like flags. Third love is unconditional, and "the one", or so many think."

"Do you believe it's real?"

"I do." She squeezed his hand. "Have *you* fallen in love three times?"

"I must have," he replied, "because I can't imagine any other life without you in it."

"Who were your first two?"

That was an excellent question.

"The first was probably a crush somewhere, at some point, maybe that cook's daughter in my parents' palace. Everything blurs together nowadays, I can't say for sure. I never acted on it, and nothing ever came of it, but when you're a kid everything seems overwhelming. The second was Ponk, it has to be, things didn't work out past a confession."

That was his own fault, in hindsight. What was also his own fault was Ponk losing an arm and dying in his arms. Any red flags were bloody ones of his own doing, or ones made by the Egg's tendrils.

"I still think about him, sometimes."

Specifically, he had nightmares of death and dismemberment. He hadn't told Puffy about them; it would only sadden them both.

"So do I," she replied, in a somber tone that surprised him. "Ponk was wonderful."

Sam tipped his head back. "He made the best lemonade."

"He was hilariously funny."

"His pranks were always good-natured, at heart."

"He was a great healer, too, and he loved you a lot. Everyone could see that."

"I guess I was too scared to do the same..."

"He deserved to be happy," she said, her tone twisted and strained to his ears, almost remorseful. For what, he realized soon after. "If you were scared to love him back, why did you love me?"

Through the sullen weight Ponk's memory had settled around his shoulders, Sam still managed to smile a little.

"I don't think I had much of a choice," he joked weakly. "You have a chokehold on my head and my heart."

"How violently romantic. You do have a way with words."

"Say what you like, it was my words that seduced you."

"You call one punctuation mistake seduction?"

"It worked, didn't it?"

Their banter was playful, but their words at their core were deeply soft and adoring. It felt like splashing around in a mountain spring for fun; the beauty and pureness of the landscape wasn't tarnished, only ephemerally altered. When the playfulness left, it would stay a spring. It would all remain honest and truthful.

"It worked," she agreed. "It was probably almost meant to be, too. I had decided long ago that the most beautiful letters to read were your own. I waited for them eagerly. You haven't written me one since."

"It's almost like we're close enough that I don't have to," Sam pointed out, grinning from ear to ear.

"Still. Write me a letter, Sam. Don't tell me when you're going to send it, or how, or where. I just want you to do it for me to read someday. Please?"

He would write her a million letters every day if he could. The chance to make her laugh and smile and getting to watch it happen for himself was something he'd give much for in a heartbeat. To write like he was running out of Time like he did back in the SMP, to use words that had enchanted her so much that one small mistake had been taken as a truth, and that in turn was the spark that lit the flame of her heart.

Sam was a perfectionist on the best of days, but that mistake was probably the best one he had made in his three lives. He was more than ready to replicate it tenfold.

"Alright, a letter, then. And in exchange, I want to know about *your* past romances. Come on, give me the gossip!"

"Hey!"

"I'm just saying, I told you now you tell me. The three times you fell in love, go!"

She sighed, not in disappointment, simply in amused annoyance. He heard and felt her shift against the door.

"My three loves, let's see... I wouldn't say Schlatt was the worst mistake I ever made, but—"

"He was, wasn't he?"

"You'd think so, but not entirely. He was the one who finally got me to leave my home and discover the world, and he gave me one of the best things in my life. I don't think Tubbo sees it that way. I think he hates me."

"He doesn't, darling. He can't. You asked him if he wanted to leave with you and he refused. It was his choice."

"And maybe I should have taken that as a sign to rebel against the ocean sooner. I should have stayed with him, and with you, and with everyone. We could have been married in the Badlands."

"I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"No, you *should* have. That was another time. Life may not have taken us down the path we thought it would, but I like this outcome. I don't have to worry about Michelle drowning or losing a life in a sea battle every time she picks up a weapon—you were right about that. Our daughter's safety matters more than treasure hunts across the waves, and she's happy here. *I'm* happy here despite everything that happened, and I will always be because I'm with you, and I'll do great good as your queen." She gave the ends of his fingers a squeeze. "Thank you."

"What about Niki?" he asked, changing the subject back, saving both his head and his heart from unavoidable ache.

"I don't think I've ever fallen for someone as quickly as I did for Niki. Have you ever believed in love at first sight? I didn't until I saw her for the first time. When I first went to L'Manberg, my eyes were only glued on Tubbo and no one else, until I saw her. A pink shadow brushed past me and I couldn't help but look. Tubbo saw, and he introduced us. I helped her fix up a few flower boxes, we got on, and I asked her on a date. I was feeling adventurous. I was just teasing her at first, but she actually accepted. The rest is History. On Doomsday, when she burned the L'Mantree, I tried to stop her and talk her out of it. She didn't listen to me. I still couldn't completely hate her. I was scared, but not hateful. I kept my distance, and so did she. We didn't talk until the Red Banquet, and there was a moment where I remembered why I had loved her in the first place, and thought that everything was my fault. She told me it wasn't, and even now, I still can't

believe her. I'm glad it ended well for us, though. Like Ponk, she deserves to be happy, wherever and whatever she's doing now."

Just hearing Puffy talk about Niki made Sam miss her too.

Fiery Nemesis with a lion's heart and a fairylike fondness for flowers and sugary treats. She was strong, stronger than many of the warriors he had fought against and beside, yet always cast aside in one way or another.

Maybe that was part of the reason Sam stood up so fiercely against his cabinet with the decision that Puffy would equally share his crown. He had a feeling that somehow History would repeat itself, and he didn't want that side-eyed shunning to happen again.

Just because Niki fought beside the greats such as Technoblade didn't mean she should have been overlooked the way she was, just like how Sam wouldn't let Southern History paint Puffy as nothing but his royal consort.

Both deserved adoration and remembrance that far exceeded his own.

"And what about me?" he asked, although it was pointless.

He knew the story of their romance like the back of his hand, but he still needed to hear it again. He wanted to hear her tell it herself.

She delivered with no hesitation.

"When I thought that you might have had feelings for me, it was more of a shock than anything. Everything hit at one like a whiplash, and I was terrified. I was still deeply infatuated with Niki and holding out hope that maybe we could repair the tear in our relationship, so thinking that someone else—especially my best friend—was moving into the picture made me sick. Even when you said that it meant nothing, I couldn't let it go. I ran from it all, I tried to block it out. Then you almost lost your last life in the Vault. Then Niki and I talked, and I was freed from those painful feelings that still binded me to her. Then the Red Banquet happened. Then I kissed you for the first time. I couldn't help myself, it suddenly opened up everything I had tried to shut away. I realized that loving again maybe wasn't so bad, and I found out I loved you more than I could ever say. I still do, maybe foolishly."

That made him smile. "Foolishly?"

"Sometimes, I wonder if the ocean's call was there for a reason, as if it was trying to save me from something, from you. I now know that's completely wrong. My feelings for Schlatt and Niki were strong, but they were brief. Mine for you were just as powerful, and they've lasted. *We've* lasted so long and

my love for you has never faded. That's how I know I made the right choice. That's why I want to be with you forever."

"I wish we had been together for longer. I wish I had known you sooner. I could have saved you from so much harm and grief."

"But we wouldn't be the same people we are now."

That was true, so true it hurt to hear. Time was perfect and never missed a second. Fate was kind. Everything they did, they did so the lightning and the thunder could be here, together, on the eve of their wedding. Everything, including death and dismay.

Sam's heart twisted at the thought that Tommy had to be out of History's picture to make them both as happy as they were now. Did it really have to be that way?

Was enjoying life selfish now he realized that?

"Can I kiss you?"

On the other side of the door, Puffy laughed. "Sam—"

"I'll close my eyes," he promised, cutting her off mid-sentence. "Please. I just need an anchor before my nerves eat me alive."

Nothing happened for a while. Then, the door shifted. Sam screwed his eyes shut and turned his head.

Puffy left him one not on his lips where he had been expecting, but rather at the juncture where his jaw met his neck. It was light, sweet and tickled him a little. He tried to lean in for another one, but she declined with a giggle and a stroke underneath his chin.

"Let's save the best until tomorrow, yeah?"

Tomorrow.

Both the embrace and the prospect warmed him, but his fears were still stubbornly clinging to him. They only grew greater the next morning, starting off in the side-room just off from the temple where he got ready.

"You're shaking, Your Majesty."

"I am?" Sam curled and uncurled his fists, letting out a nervous chuckle. "I didn't realize..."

"It's alright to be nervous."

"Nervous? Why would I be nervous?" He tried to brush it off again, but his laugh only became even more strained. He adjusted his crown and stared at himself in the mirror. He talked to his reflection. "There's nothing for me to be nervous of, everything's fine. Everything's perfect. I'm about to marry the love of my life. I've been waiting for this for years. This is what I've wanted for ages—"

"So you're scared you'll somehow mess up?"

"Mess up? What? No, what in the world would make you—"

Seepeekay grinned over his shoulder, sly and knowing.

Everything.

Right.

Sam's shoulders sagged. "I... Yeah, I guess I am."

"You won't," the fox assured him.

"But what if something goes wrong, what if she or I pull out at the last second, what if—"

"Your Majesty, forgive me, but I've seen you both together. If I ever find someone who'll love me even half as strongly as you do Puffy and she does you, I'd be over the moon. Nothing's going to go wrong because you love each other too much to let anything happen. Just *relax*."

It was easier said than done.

The wait seemed eternal. He paced in front of the altar, the amiable chatter of the attendees filling his ears from the pews. He was so out of himself, so out of touch with the physical world he was sure he could even hear the gods file into the temple themselves and take their ethereal seats. Boomer tried to reason with him, and Seepeekay attempted to calm him with friendly smiles from his post, melted in with all the other guards present and standing to attention. Neither one succeeded, unfortunately.

Sam's manic pacing continued, until the doors creaked open.

Silence was stretched across the whole room.

He stopped in his tracks.

He gazed down the aisle.

He saw her, and he held his breath.

She wore a gorgeous gown of pure white, made up of soft satin and tulle petticoats that reached her knees and bunched with the elegant magnificence of crumpled rose petals. A cream leather corset cinched her waist and a low, rounded neckline exposed her collarbone and shoulders. The whole was laced with garlands of shining pearls and embroidered with gold filigree. Instead of a veil, chains of delicate flowers were woven into her curls.

Her dress from the Red Banquet had dropped his jaw and heightened his feelings, but this was different. This was all for him, for them both. He had to resist the desperate urge to kiss her right there and then, to pick her up in his arms never to let her go again and spin her around and yell to the whole world that she was his everything, his love, his wife.

His wife.

Not quite yet, but in due time.

As soon as Puffy caught sight of him, quickened her pace down the aisle to the amusement of the whole gathering. She practically crashed into his arms once she trotted her way up the couple of stairs.

"Hey," he whispered.

She was glowing. "Hey," she murmured back.

"You are..." He couldn't even finish his sentence. He shook his head in disbelief. "Wow..."

She laughed. "You're not so bad yourself."

Nimble fingers came to adjust a few tufts of the fur collar of his cloak and stroke down his chest, over the soft white fabric of his uniform and admiring the golden stitching. She danced from hoof to hoof. Her giddiness was infectious, and Sam almost acted on his own urges then and there. He was only stopped by the coughing of the archbishop—an older man with kind eyes and an even kinder disposition—who gently invited them to continue with the ceremony.

The coronation came first. Sam knelt down beside Puffy as the crown of the realm was placed on top of her head. She held her head perfectly still and repeated the oaths with a smooth, clear voice that chimed with the crashing

ocean waves. The voice of a leader, of a captain. His captain. His queen. He helped her rise once everything was done and held her hands in his. He couldn't bear to look away from her, not even for a moment.

He barely heard a word of the service, too engrossed in the vision of perfection in front of him, too awestruck by the simple fact that she had said "yes" to him.

She kissed his hand when she slipped the ring on his finger. They had decided to keep the ones they exchanged so many nights ago, two tokens of adoration no other marriage band could mimic.

Their vows, if anything, were simply formalities. Both of them knew full well that it was impossible for them to put into words all their adoration and devotion for one another. Each and every syllable that spilled from their lips seemed to evaporate into thin air, into nothingness. The sincere and loving gazes that they bore into each other with were worth more than hundreds of vows, thousands of words, millions of letters.

Even the murmured utters of the long-awaited promise of "I do" faded as quickly as they were said, merely postscripts in the back of his memory by the time the first rounds of applause started to filter in from reality.

When the time finally came, he leaned in close. "May I?" he asked, just low enough so only she could hear.

He didn't need to ask twice. She yanked him down and there, in front of the whole congregation, Queen Puffy of the South kissed him.

Bells tolled all across the kingdom in a heavenly chorus, and flurries of pure white and pastel pink petals scattered in the streets and rained down on the gathering in the palace.

Yet still, Sam and Puffy did not take notice of any of it, only parting their embrace and tuning back into the world around them when Michelle ran up.

"Does this mean that I really am a princess now?" she asked excitedly, and the newlyweds couldn't help but laugh.

"Sweetheart, you always were," Sam cooed, wrapping her up in the tightest hug ever. "But yes, technically by law, you're a princess now."

He refused to let go of Puffy's hand, and she of his.

The only time he did was when she was asked to address their people for the first time. Up on the balcony overlooking the courtyard, she spoke with a

loud, confident voice. If the same words she had spoken had been said by any other politician, they would have probably been brushed off as sweet sounding lies—but not from the Queen. Every syllable was genuine and honest, and when the crowd cheered, the King noted with a touch of amusement that his own love for her was closely rivaled by that of their kingdom.

When she had married him, she had also married his rank and his people.

They both barely ate anything at the feast, and Sam's lips eagerly touched the back of her hand and her cheek more often than they did the rim of a glass or a morsel of food.

While most of the other guests were getting drunk off alcohol, the King and Queen were tipsy from another high entirely. It consumed their every thought and touch, so obvious that it made everyone smile whenever they looked at them. It made everything melt away and narrowed the world down to just the two of them in any crowd, any lifetime.

Their first dance of the night was beautiful. Their speeches were beautiful. The love between them was *beautiful*, and everyone said so. Many who thought that all monarchs who married did so reluctantly for power, influence and stability were proven wrong that very night. Skeptics who had nevertheless agreed to attend out of pure courtesy confessed that they had never seen anything like it. They couldn't believe their eyes.

It was like they had walked into the pages of a fairytale, and finally began to believe in happily ever afters.

They both *certainly* did.

As the fireworks were set off in the palace courtyard and all across the city beyond, the newlyweds bid goodnight to their daughter and their friends before they went to bed to try and sleep off the excitement—or so they had told everyone.

With their crowns carefully put aside, the sense of heavy duty ebbed away.

The King had his Queen, and the people rejoiced.

Now, in the privacy of their chambers, Sam wanted his wife.

At first, he said nothing. He pulled her into his arms and embraced her in the orange glow of the fire, the only light illuminating their room. His touches were featherlight, some might even say innocent, as if he was walking through a hallucination he wasn't sure was real or not, that he was scared to

break at any moment. He soaked up everything about her from her petite stature, the softness of her skin, her bouncy curls laced with flowers, the rose-pink blush dusting her cheeks, and her eyes.

Gods, her eyes. The ones he had fallen in love with all those years ago, the ones that had haunted him for ages, the ones that had caused him pain, given him hope and so much more. The ones he would die for in a heartbeat. The ones he would now be staring into forevermore.

"Puffy..."

What else could he say? No other name or word or even thought filled his mind. He knew only her presence at that moment, and he wanted her desperately. She was pretty much in the same state that he was: flustered, breathless and absolutely and undeniably in love.

"Sam..."

The call of his name was soft, so sweet and adoring. Coming from her lips, right here and right then, it felt like he couldn't bear to hear it again unless it was from her. It would never be the same. No one could ever say his name again without him falling back into the tenderness of this moment, on this night—Puffy's voice ringing in his ears, the love of his life in his arms, blissed out and adoring him to pieces.

He cupped her cheeks, bringing her into him. He gave her a kiss on her velvet lips, which ended quickly as they both burst into hushed, almost childlike giggles.

Everything about it seemed too good to be true, ridiculous almost. Neither of them could believe it. It was like stepping into a dream, although this was far better than anything Sam could ever conjure up. This was real. This was actually happening.

He leaned in and kissed her properly. It was far less formal than the one they had shared at the altar, and much less swift than the sweet, innocent embraces on the regular. Instead, this kiss was long, hot and heavy, brimming with passion and a strong sensual longing that pulled them even closer than before. So close that he could only bear to pull away an inch or two.

"Tell me what you want, darling. Tell me, and I'll give it to you."

"You." She tightened her grip around him. Her lips were red and sore. Her captivating eyes were blown wide. "I want you."

He could never get enough of the way she wanted to melt into him, clinging onto him as if he was everything to her, just as she was everything to him. He entwined their ring fingers, both newly adorned with long-overdue wedding bands.

"Always and forever," Sam promised yet again.

"Always and forever," Puffy echoed softly, "my thunder."

"How are you here, anyhow?"

'I'm not.'

"You know what I mean." Technoblade hauled himself over a boulder. Loose pebbles tumbled off the path and down the steep mountainside, landing in a heather bush. "I mean here, as in talking to me. I mean, you're dead. No offense."

'None taken.'

"You mentioned something about Dream being involved, right?"

'He's the one who was crazy enough to memorize the entirety of the knowledge inside the Revival Book. He told me how to reach a breach in limbo where the veil is thinner. It's a rift, a window between worlds that reaches into your soul and shows you whatever you desire most to see. It's not common knowledge, otherwise every soul here would stay glued to it. You can't do anything but watch, usually, but being Death's angel has its benefits. Kristen did try to talk me out of it, though.'

"Kristen, eh? So, Death does have a name after all."

'She's only letting me stay with you until you don't need me anymore.'

"You can keep her waiting."

'Techno, mate.'

"What?"

'I thought we were making progress.'

"We are, I just want to spend some lost time with my best friend. Is that such a crime?"

Philza sighed, but said nothing more about it. Technoblade continued his ascent. The pass grew thinner near the peaks and it took him all of his concentration to avoid falling to his demise, however appealing it may have seemed.

At the top, the nighttime world below was somehow even vaster than the sky. The glow of house lights and the shimmering diamonds of the ocean in the distance mirrored the night sky to perfection. A calm but assertive breeze whistled through his fur and billowed up his cloak. It cooled him down considerably from the climb. He inhaled the faint autumn chill it brought along gratefully.

"Look at the view," Techno sighed, oddly glad to do so himself.

'It's beautiful,' Phil agreed. 'I would have loved to fly higher and explore it myself.'

"I would have liked that too."

'How? You know I'm not strong enough to carry you.'

"I just would, because you'd be happy, and you'd be here with me. There were a lot of things I would have wanted to share with you and never did. I couldn't give you the world like I promised, and I'm sorry."

'Don't be, you already have.'

He was only knee-deep in his lake of grief by now, and his movements had become a little easier. It was still a hard trudge towards the light. He had a feeling he'd never really reach it. He didn't know if Philza's words had just made it easier or harder to try. Either way, he felt tears well up in his eyes and he sniffed them down, disguising it as a grunt.

Fireworks boomed in the distance, briefly illuminating a castle and its surrounding city he hadn't noticed in the dark before.

"What's that place?" he asked, pointing towards it.

'Mate, just because I'm a disembodied voice in your head doesn't mean I'm an oracle.'

"I wonder what they're celebrating."

'With kingdoms, who knows; either something completely innocent like a birthday, or something far more bloody. The public execution of an enemy, maybe. It seems to be common nowadays.'

Techno chuckled. "I see I rubbed off on you," he noted.

'Of course you did, why else do you think I joined the Syndicate?'

"Because you're my best friend and wanted us to do something fun and bond together?"

It was Philza's turn to laugh. *'There are far easier ways of doing that than joining a secret society.'*

"Like what, searching for a breach in the afterlife and talking through dimensions?"

His laugh grew louder. *'You were always so funny, Techno. I'm glad to see you've got your sense of humour back.'*

Oddly enough, so was Technoblade.

The night was still relatively young, but the climb back down the other side of the mountain was long and treacherous. He got going.

With a little luck, he'd reach the city early in the morning and manage to slip through the streets without too much scrutiny. Then he could walk along the coastline until he found a ship he could sneak onto unannounced. It could then carry him off towards... somewhere. New adventures. That sounded relatively nice now he wasn't completely alone anymore.

As he went down, they continued to talk. It was good to hear Phil's voice again, both their voices. He had wondered if he ever properly would again.

"Who's up there with you?" Techno asked, hopping off a small ledge and down onto another winding path.

'Up where?'

"In limbo."

'What in the world makes you think we're up anywhere? Heaven and Hell are meaningless; they're just expressions.'

"So, where is the afterlife then? I've lived in the Overworld, I've dug underground and I've traveled far and wide in the Nether. Haven't seen anything yet. Where else would you want it to be?"

'Everywhere, nowhere. Something that isn't concrete for the living can't be found in any one place. Why else do you think so many people believe in

different outcomes? Some believe in Heaven and Hell, others in Hades' Underworld, others in Anubis'. There are even people who don't believe in the afterlife at all, that you just die and everything's over for good. None of them are technically right, but none of them are technically wrong either. I don't even know for sure myself.'

"Then how do you know you're not somewhere in the sky?"

'You're right, I don't.'

"There we go. I believe the afterlife is in the sky, because I prefer to imagine you flying rather than tethered to the ground." Techno triumphantly awaited Philza's rebuttal. It never came. "So, as I was saying, who's up there with you?"

'Everyone, and that's something I can confirm. Eternity is shared by all souls, no matter their crimes.'

"Alright, let's narrow it down."

'Wilbur, for one.'

"Oh yeah? How's he doing?"

'Pretty good, actually. I don't know what happened, to be honest. Every single time I saw him while I was alive, he was a completely different person. Once, he was my little baby, then a difficult toddler and just as difficult a teenager. Then, he was the impulsive young adult who cut his wings off for his brother. After that, he was a valiant general, and a desperate madman. Part of his soul was sweet enough to become Ghostbur, and then another scrap of that same soul harnessed all its evil to help Dream in his plot. He was confusing, to say the least. I guess that's the result of being the son of an immortal and one of the most powerful goddesses to have ever existed. Now he's here, with us both and away from the plagues of the world, he's better. He's calm. All his scars are gone, except the ones on his fingers from his guitar strings. It's the only thing either of us seem to want to remember. He writes songs and plays them. He sings. He likes card games. He's doing alright.'

"Tommy must be terrorizing him," Techno smirked.

'Oh, that he is. I would have stopped him a long time ago if it wasn't clear he was taking advantage of limbo to give himself a childhood. He's changed in a lot of ways. He's become that little kid who latched on to your leg the first time you met him.'

Technoblade wished Tommy had stayed like that a bit longer. A lot could have been avoided, including the boy's own deaths.

"He's a good one, just flawed," Techno admitted. "We all are, and that didn't help him as much as it didn't help us."

'He talks about you, you know?'

"Really?"

'Yeah. A lot about how he's probably stronger than you now he can't die again and wants to one on one you, but also about that time you sheltered him from Dream. He says those were some of the happiest days of his lives.'

"They were some of mine too."

Technoblade wished *they* had lasted a little longer, too. Then again, he probably didn't deserve that to happen. If he couldn't love Tommy at his worst, how could he ever be worthy of loving him at his best—or rather at his most tolerable. He would never know. He would have thought it downright impossible, if others hadn't managed with no excuses or compromises.

He would have liked the chance to do it again, sometime.

'When you were asleep, Kristen also talked of someone else who came.'

Techno's ears pricked up. "What do you mean?"

Philza remained silent.

"You mean died, right?"

'Yes.'

"Who is it?"

'Forget I said anything.'

"Phil," he growled.

'I'm sorry, Techno. I shouldn't have mentioned it at all.'

"Just tell me."

'/—'

"Tell me."

'You can't relapse.'

"Relapse what? Grief? What is it, a sickness you're trying to cure me from?"

The path became harder to tread, and darker to the eye. Technoblade didn't notice the dangers.

'Techno—'

"Grief is not a sickness, it's not a disease or a plague. It's meant for the living, and by the gods I am going to live my last life."

'Techno.'

"I'm rarely treated as anything but a weapon or a storybook, and I'm sick of it. Let me be real and alive, for once—"

'Techno!'

"What?" he roared.

A strong gust of wind blew his gaze towards the path in front of him. Something jumped down from the rocks in the slope. The shadow stopped, and a moonbeam came to stroke its figure. It was about the size of a mountain lion, but it was none of the sort. Four legs, a stub instead of a tail, a long neck, a green mottled pelt.

Creeper.

'Plural.'

Similar silhouettes burst out from the mountainside after the first one, sharp claws raking the rocks and earth in their wake.

Technoblade took out his sword. "I thought they were solitary."

'Apparently not the mountain variety.'

The pride stepped forward. They turned their blackened eyes towards the piglin, mouths open wide and hissing. Sparks spat from the dark abysses of their throats. The charred gunpowder stench filling the air made his eyes water.

"I can take them." He gripped the hilt of his sword.

'Techno.'

"I can take them, Phil, all of them."

One swing was all it would take. He had killed enemies stronger than simple mobs with even less.

He stepped backwards. A rock rolled off his heel and bounced down into the unknown below.

'You have one life left.'

"And I'm not planning on losing it, don't you worry about that."

The creepers kept prowling forward. He kept stepping back. His grip on his sword slipped.

He had killed enemies with ease—once upon a time.

He hadn't had to fight properly since.

He had also never done so on such a dangerous mountain pass.

'Techno, run.'

So he did.

He took a risk and turned his back, which was when the first creeper leapt towards him. It pressed its claws into his shoulder blades, began to shake and grew hot. Technoblade slammed it against the stone and shook it off before it could detonate, angering the rest of the pride. They furiously pounded after him, tearing the pass behind them to shreds.

He was already a good way down the mountain already, too low to fathom running back up to the summit, but still high enough that falling was a dangerous risk.

Every rushed, heavy step broke more and more of the pass in his wake. It still didn't seem to disturb the creepers, who continued to give chase with fierce snarls. One almost managed to close its jaws on his heels. At one point, Techno was forced to abandon his pack—there was nothing of true importance in there that he couldn't replace anyway. The only two things he kept at hand was his emerald pendant and his sword clutched in one hand.

He finally found another hint of an abandoned trail between two inconspicuously placed rocks, and he rushed to reach it. Once behind, he could push one of the boulders to block it, and he'd be safe.

He ran.

He slipped.

The only handhold he could find was a mulberry bush clinging onto the mountain with all its determined little might.

He missed it on his way down.

The plummet was long and rocky, tearing and knocking at every bit of his body. A few of the creepers that gave chase jumped after him. They were impaled on the way down by jagged mounds.

Technoblade didn't know how he was so utterly lucky, how he was still conscious—or alive, for that matter.

A swamp the dark had hidden from him broke his tumble, and he sank into the deep mud. It devoured him whole, closing in around him with ferocious force. It took him all of his might to tear himself from its thick clutches, but much of his strength was wasted on the deep and bellowed cry of pain he let out.

Looking down, he saw his arm hanging at a painfully unnatural angle. He couldn't feel his joints, but agony shot up his nerves and into his whole body. He collapsed again.

When was the last time he had injured himself, let alone broken a bone? It was unheard of, and it was his first.

His first, alone, drowning in a strange and unfamiliar territory.

He tried to cry for Philza. All that came out was a shrill roar that shook the swamp willows and the reeds.

The avian's voice didn't answer him. Nothing did.

He lunged forward and sank again. Every breath sucked in a new mouthful of foul-smelling water and the mud clung to his thick fur, pushing him down. The pain in his arm got worse and worse. He persevered.

He could see a dry stretch of land that would hold his weight only a few arm lengths in front of him. He *had* to get there, he had to—

A beam of flickering torchlight appeared in front of him. There were voices, and the clanking of armour.

Technoblade froze. He turned around and he tried to throw himself a few lengths further away from the bank. He was too slow. There were shouts and before Techno knew it, he was choking on a rope and prodded painfully in his ribs by spears. He was hauled onto dry land and dropped on his broken arm. The pain came out not as a comprehensible cry but a guttural scream. He reared up and fought against his bonds only for skilled hands to shove him back down into submission. They treated him like a monster, but what else were they meant to do when their attacker was a wild and violent beast? A marshland monster dripping with filth, unrecognizable down to the bone as anything but a raging creature of mud and bloodlust.

Through the sludge clogging his ears and falling in front of his eyes, he could make out something of a rushed conversation.

"Haven't seen something like this in the swamp for decades!"

"'S a fiesty one too! What do we do with it, Captain?"

When the third voice spoke, Technoblade felt a cloud of dread crash down over his head; it was dark and precise, cutting where it meant to and deeply so. A clawed hand grabbed his snout and made him look up. Two narrow amber slits, glinting and glowing with the torches, were the last things Technoblade saw.

"Bring it to the palace, alive. I think Her new Majesty needs to finally see the harsh side of wearing a crown."

Something hit him hard on the head. It knocked him out cold.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Protesilaus

In all his lives, Sam had rarely felt completely calm. Tranquility felt like a fallacy for the longest time, a legend with no proof of its own existence. Even if it was real, he wouldn't have been one to obtain it. There had rarely been a moment where he could just be with someone, no strings or dread attached.

Until that morning.

Sam woke up on his own accord with no anxious jumpstart, no outstanding duties peeping through the veil of his dreams, and no violent attack. He woke up in his bed and finally took the time to appreciate the moment: the soft covers, the dark crack of dawn, and most importantly, the one he shared it with.

The one he shared everything with, now.

Puffy had her back to him, but her leg was still hooked around his. He had his own arm around her waist, his face buried in the curls spilling over her shoulders. Crushed petals were still caught in them, some strewn across the pillows and the mattress beneath them. Her light, regular breathing told him she was still fast asleep.

The first day of the rest of our lives.

He lightly pressed his lips to the tattoo on her shoulder blade. He had been the first one she had shown it off to, spending an hour straight rambling on about the anchor and the gladiolus blooms and stars surrounding it. Sam had spent ten whole minutes playfully trying to get her to admit that the hidden trident in the design's shadow was a clever reference to his own, a fact she never admitted to although she did flush when he asked. He could still see it now, even if he had no idea whether it was because it was really there or if he had fooled himself into imagining it.

It was beautiful either way. He traced the inked lines with his index, gently waking her up as he did. She rolled over to face him.

Her smile was softer and sleepier than the dawn's rays, "Hey."

All of it enchanted him. Sam felt like he was falling in love with her all over again. "Hey."

They stayed there for a while, simply gazing into each other's eyes.

When had hers changed? Their hauntingly beautiful blue had faded into something far less vibrant, but far more worldly. Sam realized at last they weren't being watched anymore. Whatever cursed hold the ocean had over her had always bled through her gaze in one way or another, in both love and war. Neither of them could escape it, until now. The sea's wandering, cold eyes were nowhere to be seen. There was only her, and nothing else.

"My beautiful, wonderful wife," he whispered, pressing his forehead against hers.

She headbutted him back gently. "My handsome, brilliant husband."

Husband and wife. Titles he could never truly get used to hearing. It made his soul soar.

It also made his stomach gurgle, somehow, and the soft moment was broken up by quiet laughs.

"Breakfast?" she suggested.

Why not.

They got up, got dressed, then went down to the kitchens and made it together.

The staff's quarters were still deserted, to their luck and relief. There was no reminders of royal duty, only two newlyweds starting the day together. They pinpointed all the ingredients in the pantry soon enough and set about cooking themselves a couple of omelettes and a small stack of pancakes.

It was at some point during that remarkably domestic *tête-à-tête* Sam's mind flashed back to a snowy cabin and windmill high above a nation far away from where they were now, where they both cooked the exact same breakfast with not only their daughter, but a son no longer by their side.

Puffy noticed him falter, but if she knew why she didn't say so. She took his pan off the stove and set it aside before the food burned, then wrapped her arms around his waist and propped her chin up on his chest. It was enough to bring him back to the moment, and he gave in.

"You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Neither of them pushed beyond that point, and they got back to work. Ten minutes later, they sat down at the hardwood table and ate. Ten minutes after that, they were still hungry and elected to dip into some of the leftover sugar buns from the wedding feast the day before, still warm in their snug wicker basket.

Puffy sat on the edge of the table and took a bite. "I'll be honest," she began, chewing, "I always thought we'd end up eloping."

Sam sat down below her, his forearms folded across her lap. "Seriously?"

"One of us would propose suddenly and inconveniently during a sea battle—probably you, let's be honest—we'd bring a dubiously qualified priest on board the next time we'd dock and we'd spend our honeymoon in a secluded

bay, just you and me, sleeping under the open sky. I never thought that I'd wake up... here."

She gestured to the kitchen around them, but Sam knew full well she meant so much more. The palace, the gardens, the people, the crown that was now shared between them.

He wiped a small spot of sugar off the end of her nose with his thumb. He smiled. "That's the magic of the future. We just never know what's going to happen next."

"I do."

"Oh, really?"

"I know I am going to spend the rest of my days with the love of my life: the best friend, genius, warrior and king I married yesterday. You might have heard of him."

"What a coincidence: I just married the love of my life yesterday as well, and she's going to outshine me in every way. She always has."

Puffy leaned down and pressed their foreheads together, and suddenly Sam couldn't think straight anymore. All he could do was feel.

The sunrise streaming through the kitchen's small oval windows, the fragrant smoke from the stove's cooling embers, the lingering aftertaste of strawberry on his tongue and the gentle skin pressing against his own.

"What's the plan?"

No plan, just us.

"I'd like to stay here, if that's alright."

"For today?"

"Forever."

Her hands came to stroke over his shoulders and down his back. "I don't think that'll be completely possible," she pointed out.

"Let's just pretend it is."

Sam leaned in for a kiss, only for a gasp and a cry to stop him.

"Your Majesties!" They both turned to find one of the cooks staring at them with wide eyes. She quickly composed herself and gave a clumsy curtsy. "You should have rung if you were hungry, we could have—"

"No, no need," he replied, standing up. Puffy jumped down from the table after him. "We know how to take care of ourselves too."

"We tried to clean up the mess," Puffy added, grabbing the plates and going to rinse them off. "And we may have stolen some of last night's leftovers. Sorry, they were just so delicious. We couldn't resist."

The cook, understandably, still looked completely baffled and could only stutter out semblances of words and jumbled sentences. That was definitely their cue to leave, and Sam took Puffy's hand.

The cook's first actual sentence after her shock came out right before they left.

"Captain Corpse is looking for you," she told them.

And the world of duty came back to spoil the calm.

"Well, his is the last face I would have wanted to see today," Puffy sighed as they hit the corridors, all still relatively deserted so early in the morning after the celebration. Realistically, they would stay so for the rest of the day.

"Same here, but it can't be helped, darling." He linked his arm with hers. "It's your time to shine, Queen Puffy."

Corpse was in the throne room, staring up at the two thrones being settled side by side and varnished. A flash of disdain crossed his eyes, but was soon replaced by his sullen seriousness when he turned around. He greeted them both with a stiff bow.

"Your Majesty," he began, then corrected himself: "Majesties. I apologize for the disturbance, but we found something lurking in the swamp. I thought it was worth bringing to your attention."

"By all means."

Sam invited him to lead the way.

Technoblade woke up in bright, unfamiliar surroundings he couldn't even see properly, kneeling painfully on a ground of rough, uneven cobbles and bound with ropes and chains.

Mud still caked his vision, and most of his other senses. Pain and an a lack of sleep muddled the rest.

His sword was no where to be found. Philza's voice too had disappeared.

He shuffled just a little, but it was enough for one of his captors to kick him in the ribs and yank at the makeshift collar around his neck. They treated him like a raging dog, or a violent prisoner waiting for the judge's final verdict. He was quite likely a bit of both to them.

Somewhere ahead of him, footsteps. They were far, and didn't get much closer. He couldn't make out a thing.

"During our patrol along the borders of the palace last night, we saw something writhing in the swampland," began the deep, cutting voice who had spoken the night before. "When we hauled it out, it tried to break free and attack us. It injured two of my men. We would have taken care of it on the spot, but we decided to check with yourselves just in case. Nothing like this has ever been found in the South before—perhaps it's worth imprisoning indefinitely, to test on and analyze further. There's a possibility that we could harvest something from it too, who knows, or keep it as a pet? Would Her Royal Majesty like to deal out the sentence herself, as her first decision as queen?"

The last remark was polite only in words. The intention, even Technoblade could tell in his drowsy state, was anything but.

He tried to loosen the hold the ropes and chains had around his neck and his joints, to no avail. He was roughly manhandled back into place, and kept there with aggressive shouts and knees digging into his spine. Their hold on him grew tighter, perhaps even impatient. They were waiting for any order, preferably an execution.

Technoblade wouldn't have expected anything less from monarchs. In the end, most of them were the same as each other.

"Set it free."

Technoblade's ears pricked up.

Her sound was as clear as ocean waters—even managing to bypass the filth clogging his ears—as firm as a rock in the midst of a terrible current, and as

assertive as that of a ship's captain. The queen, if he had to guess, but something was off. She was not just any random queen.

Her voice rang a bell in the depths of his memory. It only got louder as she continued to speak.

The first voice spluttered. "Excuse me?"

"If you forcefully took it out of its habitat with no reason, then of course it would attack you."

"I don't see—"

"As far as I can see, you and your patrol were in the wrong. We will tend to your injured men and make sure they are compensated, but you will bring your "prize" back to where you found it and leave it there. Is that clear?"

"I—"

"She's right," another voice spoke up, also firm and assertive. Also so familiar. "It was provoked, and killing or torturing it senselessly because of a mistake it didn't make is monstrous behaviour. You will return it to the swamp immediately."

"And what if it is aggressive and starts a rampage?"

"Then we will deal with it accordingly. Until then, it's free to go."

The chain around his neck was yanked backwards, his weakened body forced to follow it. The shock jolted his senses. More mud dropped down from over his eyes.

The world became more than a white blur. Against the bright glare of the walls around him, he could finally make out proper figures.

The owner of the pair of amber eyes from earlier was a black cat with sleek fur and an imposing stature, striding towards him with a thunderous glare on his features and in every flick of his claws.

Two more were heading away from him.

The bells grew louder and louder as his stuffy snout caught the passing whiff of a company long since passed. One small, one tall; one brown and white, one green; one sheep, one man.

Techno fought against his bonds, but his captors held strong. The cat loomed over him, blocking his view. The piglin craned his head around him.

He knew them.

He knew their names.

"You heard them," hissed the cat, "let's take it back."

Disposed in the wilderness, yet again.

Carried—pulled, yanked, torn—away from familiarity, yet again.

Destined to be alone, yet again.

The portcullis grew closer, and the figures farther.

He screamed the only thing that could save him. The only name that would confirm anything, anything at all.

"Daedalus!"

Silence, and stillness.

His throat was raw, his cry was choked—but it was enough.

Enough to be heard.

The taller silhouette stopped. The second one did the same, and turned slightly.

"Sam, what is it?"

Sam.

Technoblade almost cried with relief. Adrenaline overcame him—again, it wasn't as strong or intense as it should have been, but it was enough.

Enough for Protesilaus to make an appearance, and enough for the legend in him to release one last hurrah.

He broke from his chains and ropes, shoved the soldiers to the ground and rushed forwards. He collapsed to the cobbles below, his broken arm twisting even further underneath his body. He groaned. He sobbed.

Someone rushed to his aid and lifted him up to meet their eyes. Bright green rings glowing with shock, drowned in a black void.

"Techno—oh my gods!—is that you?"

As a response, the piglin pushed his head closer, craving anything more that could soothe his panic. Their foreheads touched and finally everything fell into place. Sam's hand drifted down and wiped the muck off the emerald pendant hidden in his fur and beneath his tattered shirt.

"Puffy, it's Technoblade!"

"What?" Hoofsteps rushed towards them both and a pair of small hands cupped his face. "Oh my gods... Techno? Can you hear me?"

If he wasn't so weak and speechless, he would have stroked her cheek back. As it were, he could only stare at her silently, his eyes unfocused and his jaw slack. He didn't know at what point he started falling forwards, only that he almost crushed her under his limp bulk.

"We need a physician," Puffy yelled, "now!"

More voices passed the message on until the whole courtyard was buzzing with activity. The last ounce of Techno's strength and tension disappeared. He slumped further. His eyes fluttered shut.

"It's alright, buddy." Sam's own arms came to steady him again. "We've got you, we've got you..."

The world went black once again.

"You can't let him stay."

Sam turned his head, "Why not?"

Corpse's tail flicked out behind him. "If this is the great Blade of legend, you don't want him here. This is the beast who tore down entire empires by himself. Crowns get crushed underneath his feet."

"You don't know him," Sam retorted. "We do. He's not a senseless killer, not anymore."

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, people change. History comes back to bite, hard. If what you say about not seeing him for years is true, then how do you know he hasn't run back to his old habits?"

"Because he saved my life."

"I've had old friends who saved my lives too, and I ended up facing them on the battlefield. Friends and crewmates one day, impostors and enemies the next. Bonds like that don't last as long as you think they do."

"Maybe you were just unlucky."

"And what if you're *wrong*, Your Majesty? What if us finding him in the swamp wasn't an accident? So far away from your old home, alone? What are the chances of that? What if he's been brainwashed into hunting you down? What if all this is nothing but an act to burn the South to the ground?"

Sam did not like the newfound dread twisting in his gut. Seeds of doubt were sewn in his mind, and grew into gnarled thorns.

"And what if he kills the queen or the princess in cold blood? He could be a hired assassin now for all we know. If you're not going to think of your people, at least think of your family. Would you ever forgive yourself if they were murdered because of your own blind trust?"

Sam peeked out through the crack in the door and into the room beyond.
"He still *seems* the same."

"Looks can be deceiving. You didn't take my advice about your marriage, please at least listen to me here."

"We'll see."

Sam wondered how in the world Corpse was still on his side and putting up with him. The guard captain was probably wondering the same thing, as he left with a disgruntled huff.

But for once, Sam did listen.

Corpse's warnings floated in and out of his mind, slathering their worries over Techno's form. Sam could almost see what he meant. He nearly believed it all.

Nearly.

It was still enough to concern him.

He walked back into the room.

"Well, well," Technoblade chuckled, inspecting the silver and sapphire band on Puffy's finger. "Things certainly have developed. It was about time."

"It was, wasn't it?"

"Congratulations to the both of you." He squeezed her hand and let it go. "When was the ceremony?"

"Yesterday."

His heart sank. "Yesterday?"

She gave him a sheepish smile, "You just missed it."

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine, you probably wouldn't have liked it anyway. Too many courtiers, too much luxury, definitely not your style."

"I wouldn't have cared. I would have been there to see two of my friends finally tie the knot. That would have meant the world to me." He looked up when Sam approached his bedside. "You both look great, by the way. The ocean treated you well."

Sam scoffed, then smiled back. He stood behind Puffy, his hand on her shoulder. "I'm not going to lie, you're in a terrible state. You really scared us back there."

"So did you. I thought you were really going to execute me."

"The whole army probably wanted us to."

Technoblade eventually took in the rest of his magnificent surroundings, the finery of the clothes they wore and his bedsheets, and finally the crowns sitting on top of their heads.

"Fancied a change of job?" he teased.

"Oh, you noticed?"

"It's hard to ignore."

Sam took off his headpiece and messed up his hair a little more. "Does that help?"

There was Daedalus.

"Much. Still doesn't explain it."

"It's a long story," Puffy said, glancing at Sam.

Technoblade shifted more comfortably, propping his pillows against his back. "Well, I don't think I'm going to be leaving for a while."

"Uh, about that..." Sam tapped Puffy's shoulder and gestured towards the door. The relief on his face had twisted. "Can I talk to you, darling? It's important."

Puffy gave him an inquisitive look, but upon receiving no direct answer elected to follow him out of the room. Technoblade was confused too, and cocked his ears in their direction. He strained himself to try and listen in.

Outside the door, the ambiance appeared to be far more somber than inside the brightly lit medical ward. The threshold was only open by a crack, but Techno managed to catch snippets of the exchange afoot.

"He can't stay."

"Wait, what? What do you mean?"

"He can't stay, Puffy."

"What's going on?"

"I don't know what to think..."

"Sam, it's Technoblade."

"Exactly, it's Technoblade, and we haven't seen him for years. He's alone and far away from the SMP: what says he isn't exiled? Violent? Bloodthirsty? Ready to murder us in our sleep?"

"Look at him, he's injured! He wouldn't hurt a fly!"

"You don't know that for sure. No one does!"

"He would never hurt us, not after everything we've been through together."

"He had been through hell with the Pogtopians too. That didn't stop him from taking one of Tubbo's lives, Puffy! What makes you think he wouldn't do it again?"

Technoblade didn't get to hear any more—not that he really wanted to—as someone else pushed their way into the ward. Someone smaller than the others, but who could probably outshine, outcry and outperform them all if given the chance. She often was, and Technoblade had always been her favourite enabler.

"Uncle Techno?" Michelle gasped. "No one told me you were visiting!"

"Uh, surprise?"

He often thought that the term "bundle of joy" only referred to babies, small little things so delicate and fragile he could accidentally crush under his trotters, and so unaware of being so by thriving on love and pure happiness. However, he could find no other term to describe the fuzzy cannonball that threw herself around his neck and quite nearly punched his sling in the process.

If someone had told him years ago he'd be struggling against the weight of a literal child, he would have been very offended. She was still small, but had grown considerably, as piglins often did. When once she was about knee-height for him, she'd now probably make it just below his waist.

"I'm a princess now," she announced proudly, "and I'm training with the royal guard."

"Huh, is that so?"

"I'm more advanced than all the others," she continued, her head held just as high and mightily as before. "I told them you taught me, and you're the best uncle in the world!"

It was as if no time had passed at all between their goodbye and now. Less than a day, perhaps, or a week at most. She didn't greet him with teary-eyed cries or ask him invasive questions about his whereabouts. She just picked it up where they left off, and he did the same.

He could still hold her entire hand in his palm, though. It never failed to seem so comical, if it wasn't so heartwarming. He missed it.

"I don't doubt you are," he replied, squeezing her trotters. "You've always been the best student I ever had."

She tilted her head. "Wasn't I your *only* student?"

No, not exactly, but Technoblade didn't want to think too much about those he left in the SMP. He smiled, and left it at that.

"Michelle, don't hurt him!"

"Ma, he's fine! He's Technoblade!"

"It's still not a reason to torture him. His arm's broken!"

Puffy rushed in again, gently chased her daughter away from his injury, readjusted the bedsheets and fluffed up his pillows. It seemed almost as if she was compensating for something.

The conversation Techno had overheard came back to him. Although he didn't know what its conclusion was, the weight of what he did understand ripped him away from the little domestic dreamland Michelle had created for him, and dampened his mood considerably.

It must have shown on his face, as Puffy tried to reassure him with a smile. "Sam's somehow *more* paranoid than when you last saw him, believe it or not."

By the door, Sam was looking anywhere but at Techno.

"Fortunately," she continued, brightening up, "my decisions matter as much as his, and I've decided you can stay."

Techno shook his head. "No, he's right, I get it. I won't stay for any longer than I have to. I'll be out in the next week."

"You don't—"

"I will. My arrival here was accident, and I've caused more harm than grief."

He tried to raise himself higher, suppressing a groan of stiff agony. He had to be out in the week, for everyone's sake, but notably his own.

Sam was right: they hadn't seen each other in ages. Technoblade hadn't truly been a part of civilization for that same amount of time. No one knew what had changed, if at all, not even himself. The unknown was dangerous and dark, and the piglin didn't want to venture much further. He didn't want to risk sinking back into the bloodthirsty myth he had desperately tried to control and distance himself from.

The voices were gone, but what if snippets of familiarity somehow summoned them back? What then? Would he be stronger and more capable of controlling them, or weaker and unresisting?

He didn't want to risk taking anything out on friends, not again. He had left the SMP to wander alone and save everyone from himself, and to trudge through the deep lake of melancholy Philza's passing left him—alone, again.

Alone, because he had to.

Alone, because he was always destined to be.

"It's for the best," he sighed, no conviction in his tone.

"Yeah, for the best."

Sam's echo was just as hollow and deep as one rocketing through an endless cavern. Technoblade just wished that he'd *look* at him properly.

He hadn't ever taken the time to think about what would happen when he met Sam again—if he met him again, that was. Whatever part of him had closed the book once Sam left the SMP under his nose did so sharply. In hindsight, Techno must have been angry.

Very angry.

Perhaps even hateful.

One by one, everyone had left him. Philza chose Lady Death, Sam chose Puffy, Tommy succumbed to Dream, Ranboo built a new life with Tubbo and abandoned his home in the Antarctic Commune, Niki opened the bakery and became too busy to visit anymore, and Sapnap happily returned to the nation that had once exiled him. It was lunacy, the lot of it! A sappy, ungrateful ending for all of them. Once again, when the great Blade was no longer needed, he was cast aside and ignored.

That was what the voices had claimed, at the time. It was likely one of the last times he had heard them. They had always been hungry, furious little parasites, gleefully sucking up blood and eating up his life like a theater show.

Technoblade had always struggled to fight them, but when he was alone it was even harder. He harnessed their resentment and became even more of a recluse. He left the SMP with practically no remorse. He lost himself entirely.

Then Philza talked to him, and everything came rushing back: his love, his good, even his own name that no one had uttered in months. He missed everyone, and he hated none.

He still couldn't bring himself to give Sam anything, not a smile, not an apology or any sign of a built-up confession. Sam struggled the same way.

Technoblade knew Sam saw him differently now: the dear friend who had always been so social and tried to include him now couldn't even look him in the eye and decided to send him away. The old Sam would have never even dreamed of claiming Technoblade was a monster, and yet here he did, unintentionally or not.

It wasn't kingdom that had changed him; it was nothing but Time and the bitterness of their rushed goodbye.

Had they even had one in the first place?

Technoblade had a feeling they wouldn't get one here and now either.

The rest of that day, Sam didn't spend much time in the healing ward. He went off to deal with supposedly important matters that were nothing but masked excuses.

Puffy was the one who stayed by Techno's side, her and Michelle. They recounted epic stories of their time on the ocean when they were together, playing off each other perfectly. Michelle told him her childhood secrets when she was alone with him, and Puffy snippets of her life she had reportedly not mentioned to anyone before. The dreamy details of Sam's proposal, for instance, whispered in confidence like a series of secrets.

It warmed Techno's heart to know that Sam perhaps hadn't changed too much after all. It hurt to wonder if maybe Technoblade himself was in fact the problem.

That night, he barely slept. His eyes were closed, but his brain was whirring and he was still very much aware of the real world around him. He was desperate to start dreaming, but just as equally frightened for them to turn into nightmares. The uncertainty cancelled both options out, and he stayed awake and lucid.

He would have chatted with Philza a little, if that damn crow would respond. Why wasn't he picking up? Why wasn't he saying anything? Was he still even there?

He gripped his emerald pendant, the only material thing he had left.

Phil had only said he'd leave when Techno no longer needed him.

I'm not ready. Come back.

The Angel of Death still didn't answer.

Technoblade vowed he'd stay up until he did. He could wait. He would wait, and that's just what he did.

The palace clock struck midnight. His eyes grew heavy and his common sense begged him to sleep properly, but he didn't listen.

All he paid attention to was his mind's own radio silence, and the door that creaked open ominously in the dead of night.

He opened his eyes, but stayed perfectly still. He didn't even breathe. One suspicious shift of his bedsheets could be a death sentence.

From the corner of his eyes, he watched a slender shadow slip into the healing ward through the crack in the threshold, disappearing out of sight as it crossed the room and melted into its stiff candlelit lookalikes lining the walls. Rolled over on his side, Technoblade didn't dare do anything.

Not until something touched his back.

Ignoring the agony of his broken arm, Techno twisted around, grabbed the passing shadow in his good fist and threw it in a perfect arch over his head. The intruder came crashing down on the other side of Techno's bed, groaning and dazed. The piglin wasted no time in snatching up the flaming chandelier by his bedside and holding it out in front of him.

The shadow raised itself up onto its hands and knees. It removed its hood.

Technoblade didn't even know why he was surprised. "You," he growled.

Corpse leapt back up onto his feet and shook the rest of his senses straight. He spun around to face Technoblade again. His rapier shone in a thin silver line against the flickering light of the candelabra, appearing and disappearing at will. Hard for adversaries to see and parry, but easy for its handler to harm and even kill with.

"I won't let the South get overrun by monsters," he spat. "The King is too soft, but I won't let him lose his throne because of his bad judgment."

Technoblade surprised himself by blocking the first swing that came towards him. With nothing but one arm and a chandelier, he was doing quite well.

The flame went out, and only the stars dared peep their light in through the windows to witness the battle. The feline hissed and swung again. Technoblade parried. In his rush, his bedsheets twisted around his trotters and he tripped off the mattress. He didn't have to untangle himself: one swift and clean cut from the sword tore them to shreds.

"I would have expected more bite from the infamous Technoblade," Corpse remarked. "I never thought he'd be such a clumsy *little* thing who can't even hold up against a flimsy little sword."

He steadied the tip of his blade. Techno watched the needle-thin point hover right between his eyes.

Corpse pulled his arm back.

Something barreled towards him and headbutted him in the stomach. Corpse's sword escaped his paws and his sleek body slid across the tiles towards a dark corner of the room, as limp as a dead weasel.

Puffy rubbed the top of her head and helped Technoblade to his feet.

"I knew he'd be up to no good," she muttered. Her hand came to rest against Techno's shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Dazed, yes.

Alright? Could be better, but he was alive.

He nodded.

Puffy handed him back his candelabra and stroked a soothing touch on the shoulder of his injured arm. She then turned to Corpse, who rolled over with a growl and hauled himself onto his knees.

"I was wondering when you'd finally snap," she said, folding her arms in front of her chest.

All Corpse did was scoff.

He stood up and picked up his sword. His fur was bristled and his claws unsheathed. The guard captain with the trust issues and skilled fighting techniques became a wild animal, crazy and nothing more. There was only fire behind his eyes and only anger in his movements. His deep, raspy voice made Techno's insides curl.

"If I kill the pirate, the bloodthirsty outlaw will be executed. I'll save the throne and my energy. Two for the price of one."

As he came closer, Puffy unsheathed the cutlass hanging around her waist.

"Puffy, get behind me," Technoblade ordered, staggering forwards to her aid.

She slipped under his arm and back in front. "Are you insane? *You're* the injured one!"

"Sam will kill me if anything happens to you."

"He'll never forgive me if you die needlessly either!"

"I may have one life left, but I will give it to you without—"

He realized his mistake as soon as the words left his mouth.

Corpse's eyes glinted with greed. "Last life? This just keeps getting better and better..."

He leapt at them with a yowl, his murderous lunge only blocked at the last second by Puffy's blade. She pushed him back and immediately got ready to parry another swing, only to get tripped up and forced back. She let out a loud bleat of pain as Corpse's claws raked across her arm.

Technoblade seemed to have been completely forgotten, the fight for justice turning into a fierce duel heavy with personal contempt. He took hold of the edge of a silver tray and pulled. Healing potions and other vials of medicine smashed against the ground. Ignoring the hurried approaching footsteps out in the hallway, Techno threw it to Puffy just in time for her to block Corpse's next swing and hit him over the head with it.

Hardened warriors were never deterred by a simple hit, and Corpse gathered his bearings soon enough. It was, however, enough for Puffy to gather hers as well.

Her first cutlass swing split the feline's purple mask in two, revealing the horrifically scarred skin hidden beneath it. Her second shredded his cape at an uneven, diagonal angle and cut across his tail. Her third hit his stomach and although it didn't break through the armour, it knocked Corpse to the floor.

The door burst open and two guards rushed in with confused cries. The infuriated third figure at their head pushed them aside and entered the mele without a second look. He dealt the final blow.

A trident came down and embedded itself into the ground. The cat shrieked.

"The only blind trust I've had is towards you," Sam spat, his trident's prongs encircling Corpse's throat. One more inch to either side and the cat would be dead.

The captain gasped. "Your Majesty—"

"You've been threatening my wife ever since we came here, you wanted me to turn against Techno, and now you're trying to kill them both. You're following no one's orders but your own."

"I'm looking out for the Crown—"

"You're looking out for *yourself* and your position here. You're making *your* justice everyone's law and believe me, I've tried it before and it doesn't work. You have until dawn to pack and say your goodbyes. You'll leave the South and never return."

"Your sister told me to protect you," Corpse rushed to say. "You'll really go against the words of the dead?"

"I don't know," Sam hissed, "would you? You promised to look out not just for me but for everything I hold dear. You've broken that pact. I'll make my peace with her memory if that's what it takes, and I hope you find something in your heart to make yours. Now, leave."

He pulled his trident away, ripping the points out of the floor tiles. Corpse scrambled to his feet and rubbed his throat, retching and inhaling deep, painful-sounding gulps of air. His tail flicked with fury, but Sam's grip around his trident hadn't loosened. He was ready to lunge again if the need came to be.

The black cat swivelled around, staring down each of his three adversaries in turn. His last glance landed on Puffy.

She held her head higher.

As he took a step towards her, Sam, the guards and Techno did so too, very real and makeshift weapons aloft and ready. She stopped them with a wave of her hand.

"So, this is what happens to your political opposition, then?" Corpse wiped the blood trickling down from his nose. "Stepped on, cut up, told to disappear without a trace. Tell me, before I waltz out of your life—before I turn away from everything I ever knew, before I ride off into the sunset, go on to

worthier pastures, restore everything the years have taken from me—how long do you think this pantomime will last? This *joke* of a rule you're building up. Is this a game to you? Is it all nothing but an act, a shiny plaything that comes as a bonus with seducing a monarch?"

Puffy scoffed. "A game? Seducing? You really think I'm that shallow? How can one person like me alter the time-honoured way the game is played? Nothing about my ascent to power has been illegal or immoral. All I did was marry my long-time partner who loves me as dearly and faithfully as I love him. I didn't kill, I didn't maim, I didn't *force* anyone to give me the crown. What happened happened. So before you get onto your high horse, what did you expect me to do? I don't care what the court thinks, I'm not in business for them. I am wearing the crown for the people of the South, just like the King is, not for myself. There's no malice behind anything I've done here, no matter how far you try to search to find it. I will help give this kingdom the good it deserves."

"And if you fail?"

"Then I won't hide it. I prefer to win by admitting my sin than to lose with a halo. Would you have preferred me to lie about everything, start dealing out false promises of completely solving wars, misery and plagues I have already fought against to no avail? I have taken them on my whole life, and I can tell you right now there's no hope of a true solution—even if I lived for a hundred years."

"So you won't even try. Incompetence and fear at its finest."

"Incompetence and fear would be running away, and cowardice would be unable to even attempt to trust anyone."

"There's evil in every government," Corpse spat, a statement that Technoblade unfortunately found himself slightly agreeing with.

Puffy stood her ground. "Thankfully, the South's has now been eradicated. I don't care where you decide to whip up and spread your hate, but it won't be here. Is that clear?"

Corpse's tongue brushed over his canines. "Crystal."

"As my husband ordered you to; leave, and never come back again."

"Of course, Your *most humble* Majesty..."

Before he left the ward, he glanced back.

"Sheep follow," he told her as a final word of warning, "they don't lead. You'll bring nothing but ache and tragedy to the South."

"Then I will strive to be the best Southern queen to have ever been, just to spite you."

He scoffed, but she stood her ground, gaze blazing. He lingered a little longer, surveying her up and down, then bit the corner of his own muzzle and growled. He ducked skillfully underneath a swing of Sam's trident, and slipped out like a snake.

The next time Technoblade saw him, he was in the courtyard saddling up his horse and securing his packs on its back. When morning had risen, everyone in the palace had found out what had happened. They came to see Corpse off not out of respect, but shock and curiosity.

The guard captain ignored them all, even roughly brushing off Seepeekay when he rushed up to demand what was happening.

Sam gave the truthful answer a couple of minutes later with an informal speech detailing the past day and night's events. He explained why Corpse had supposedly done what he did, and even gave the cat the opportunity to correct him and tell his own side. Corpse never did. He refused with a hiss.

When Corpse was banished, that was when the true colours of some were revealed. Enough soldiers for a small fighting unit decided to leave with him, each pledging their new loyalty to their disgraced general rather than to a spineless king and his pirate queen.

The loss of ranks wasn't great, but it wasn't unfelt either.

With that small squad gone, they lost part of their safety. When they walked out of the castle doors for the last time, they felt no relief.

All eyes were on the royal couple now, upon the outside steps leading to the throne room. Puffy was the first to react.

"Seepeekay," she said, hiding the crack in her voice with a cough. "Could I talk to you?"

The fox nodded, "Yes, Your Majesty." He followed her back through the palace doors.

Technoblade wanted to join them. Even with Corpse gone, things were still off. Sam was silent, still, and not looking at him. He could leave through the gates too, and barely anyone would bat an eye.

He almost did.

"We can't bear to lose you again, Techno," Sam suddenly blurted out. "I can't bear to lose you again."

Techno stopped in his tracks. He turned back, puzzled. "Lose me?"

The words seemed to strangle Sam, and he pushed them out with heavy puffs of air. Speaking was difficult, but that didn't stop him from finally holding Techno's gaze properly and firmly.

"I know you probably hate all this and would rather leave. We took up thrones and crowns and I know that it goes against everything you believe in. I wouldn't blame you if you didn't want to stay or even talk to us ever again. I wasn't as welcoming as I should have been, and Corpse tried to kill you twice and... I'm sorry, I'm sorry for everything—"

Technoblade cut him off. "Sam, do you remember what the Syndicate's motto is?"

"Sic semper tyrannis," he replied without hesitation.

"Do you know what it means?"

"Thus always to tyrants."

"Exactly, *tyrants*. I know that you are *not* one of them. The way you dealt with Corpse proves it. However," Techno continued as they turned away from the disgraced parade and headed back inside, "you *are* an idiot. You should have killed him where he stood."

Sam laughed. "I'm sure you would have been dying to do it yourself."

"Honestly, he'd probably kill me first." He looked down at his broken arm. "I'm not the fighter I once was."

Sam patted him heartily on his back. "We'll get you up and working in no time, big guy. You're safe now."

In the throne room, Puffy inducted Seepeekay as the South's new military advisor and captain of the royal guard. Sam briefly left Techno's side to congratulate the fox himself.

Technoblade didn't dare take a step closer, not at first. He mulled over what Sam had said to him.

Losing him.

Was it an invite to stay? For a while? For good? Who was to say?

You're safe now.

He didn't move for a while, just staring at the scene in front of him. It seemed all strangely homely for a royal household, with a king and queen so in love and just in their decisions and actions, a princess who charmed every heart no matter how warm or how cold, a new guard captain who spoke to the monarchs as friends instead of rulers, and undoubtedly other good and welcoming souls he hadn't had the pleasure to meet yet.

Technoblade, not for the first time, tried to imagine himself in the picture as well—and he did, almost completely clearly.

He didn't know what it was that made him truly want to stay. It could have been the safety, the exhaustion of his weakened bones begging for a stable era of rest, maybe even the love and affection radiating towards him after a long drought.

Perhaps it was something stranger. A mystical force painting a portrait in his mind, gently coaxing him towards friends, towards a new life.

Maybe Phil was passing the torch of his well-being on to the living again.

Techno's best friend couldn't be there all the time, but others could. This was what the avian's voice had been preparing Techno for. Philza could have been less than an angel, and more of an oracle. He could have known where his journey would end, and decided to help push him towards it.

And when Technoblade had finally arrived, Philza left.

So what now?

A beginning of another chapter of his myth, in a new land but with a couple of recognizable friendly faces. New enough to relax and ease into peace, still familiar in part to keep him afloat in the ocean of the unknown. It sounded inviting. Another life sounded surprisingly *nice*.

Technoblade wasn't on his own, because he didn't have to be anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Blazing Flames

Things were... alright.

They were not perfect, but they were not awful either. Things were okay, just okay. Ranboo still spent long hours at the prison, but he came home a lot more often. He actually hung up his cloak and harpoon before he sat down for dinner instead of keeping them on himself at all times. He stayed for longer instead of leaving in ten or twenty minutes. He slept for more than three hours, sometimes, and started to see spending time with Michael as more than a liability to his duties. He was still unnaturally stiff and cold, and Tubbo could always see more of a ruthless general in him than his dear friend, but there was progress.

Somewhere.

While he wasn't particularly harsh with Tubbo, he didn't hide his suspicion or weariness in regards to a frequent guest in the house and home. He only mentioned it aloud once, and he wasn't too discreet about it.

"What is she doing here?" he hissed, jabbing his weapon towards the dining table. Aimsey looked up, as did Michael.

Tubbo crossed his arms and tried to block the enderman hybrid's view—emphasis on tried. The ram barely came up to his chest and height.

"I invited her."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"She's..."

"She's what, Ranboo?"

He was ready to provoke the answer out of him if he had to, and made it obvious he would. It very clearly took Ranboo aback, who could only hesitate and stutter out one word beginning of points he tried to make as quickly as he abandoned them.

"Did she stir up trouble during her visit?" Tubbo asked, knowing the answer in advance.

Ranboo said nothing.

"You've got your culprit and he's your prisoner. Stop pushing his mistakes on everyone else around him."

Ranboo still said nothing, but gave Aimsey a sidelong glance. He left a second later, slamming the door. The whole cabin shook. No one asked him where he was going. It was pretty obvious. To be fair, no one asked anything of him anymore. There was no point.

The Warden was locked up in his own little world, and all those who had close twinings with Pandora's Vault ended up paying the price in the past. The prison was perhaps the only instance of History repeating itself people nowadays actually took into account.

Tubbo shook his head and rolled his eyes. He sat back down at the table and dove back into the papers strewn out in front of him. Beside him, Michael was teaching Aimsey how to draw.

"There!" The piglin put down his crayon and proudly held up his picture. "That's how you draw a flower!"

Aimsey finished off her own and stared. Whereas Ranboo's remarks made her frown and sulk, a simple drawing made her grin widely. She showed it to Michael in turn, who beamed just as brightly.

"It's good!" he exclaimed, brandishing his own again. "We match!"

Aimsey shyly took hers back and traced the coloured scribbles fondly, taking her time to stroke over the green stem and pink petals. It was simple and unremarkable to the outside eye, easily mistaken as a picture made by a young child, but Tubbo could see it was worth more than diamonds to Aimsey.

"I've never drawn anything before," she admitted, "it's fun."

"It's really fun! I'm going to be an artist one day," Michael told them all proudly.

"Alongside being a knight, an astronaut, and a pirate?" Tubbo added teasingly.

"Of course!"

"Well, the list is growing long."

"I have big dreams!"

Tubbo was glad he encouraged them. He reached out and ruffled the top of his son's head. "The biggest," he agreed, "especially for such a little piglin."

"Hey, I'm not little!" he protested, standing up on his chair and planting his hands squarely on his hips. "I'm big and brave, just like Uncle Techno! Do you think I'll be as cool as him someday?"

Aimsey snapped back from her picture, realizing the question was addressed to her. "I've never met your uncle," she confessed.

"You have to! He's so cool, cooler than anyone I know. He tells awesome stories and gives the best cuddles! "

Tubbo felt his insides churn.

Michael looked his way. "We can go see him tomorrow," he suggested. "Please?"

No one had told him of what had been found in the tundra. Tubbo was not about to be the first. "We can't."

"Why not?"

"He's on a journey right now."

"When's he coming back?"

He's not.

Tubbo shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Oh, well," Michael sighed, giving up without much of a fight. He turned back to Aimsey. "We'll see him when he returns. I have so much to tell him, and I'm sure you'll become best friends!"

How Tubbo missed having the same childish faith in everything, in everyone. Adulthood was certainly an experience, and not necessarily a good one in his book.

"I'd like to meet him," Aimsey said. "Do you think he'll be offended if I don't know anything about him?"

The piglin blinked at her. "You don't know anything?"

"Nothing."

"You're kidding me! That's impossible!"

"Michael," Tubbo chided with a tut.

"It's impossible," Michael cried again, defensive. He leapt down from his chair and pointed Aimsey's way. "Don't move! I'll be back!"

As he ran off, Aimsey glanced at Tubbo. "Where's he going?"

"Probably to search Ranboo's bookshelves, if I had to guess," the ram replied. "He's got a lot of books to go through, so we're safe for a while yet."

She laughed a little at that, and so did he. He went back to his work, and noticed out of the corner of his eye that she did too. Tongue out and nose so close to the paper she was almost eating it, Aimsey tried to redraw a similar flower than the first one she had done, this time in orange and yellow. Tubbo had never seen someone so utterly engrossed in a piece of art, not even his own son.

And that was saying something.

When she finished, she compared the two. From afar, the newer coloured lines looked a little shakier to Tubbo than the ones made under Michael's guidance. It seemed to be satisfactory enough for the bunny, however, as she signed it and put it carefully to the side. He also noted she added a small message in the corner. He couldn't see much, but the words "To Eryn" jumped out. When she caught him looking and frowning, he cleared his throat and buried his head back into a piece of paper he had never paid so much attention to before in his whole life. He was aware of her watching him, but he pretended not to notice immediately.

"What are those?"

"Important papers."

"For what?"

"I am the leader of Snowchester, believe it or not," he reminded her. "I have work to do too."

"Oh, yeah." She leaned across and laid her head between her folded arms. "I thought nothing really happened here anymore."

"It doesn't, not really. These are just a few outstanding bits I need to stop procrastinating on."

"Like what?"

"Badlands business, mainly," he answered, signing off on another deal and setting it aside with the others. "A couple of permissions to fix some damaged spots in the bridge, some trading offers, a few requests to pay a visit the redstone workshops—I've said yes, because I think you'd like to see them too."

"Cool! And these?" She pointed to the papers in question.

"A few letters, mostly."

A few was a gross underestimation. The couple of hefty piles were daunting things, and Tubbo internally cursed the sleepless night that was to come.

"From whom?" she asked.

"I don't know: once you've answered them all, the names and contents just blur together."

"Do you ever answer these ones?" Aimsey asked, holding up a hefty stack he had shoved into a rusting tin and almost forgotten. On purpose.

Tubbo took them from her. "Not directly."

"Why not?"

He traced the writing with his index. The smell of the salty sea still clung strongly to them. "They're from my mother."

"Your mother?"

He fisted the edges of the envelopes and folded papers inside. He put them away before he tore them clean apart.

"My mother," he agreed, snapping the lid to the tin shut with a bitter scowl.

When was the last time Tubbo had properly read one of her letters? He didn't know. Maybe it was when she first sailed away, desperate to find the one line telling him she had changed her mind and was coming home. That little glimmer was his own treasure, and the hunt for it more exhilarating than anything else. He bobbed and weaved through kraken arms, underneath canon fire, through lost cities and between vibrant coral reefs—all made up of inked words on a page—only to try and glimpse the one thing he wanted so much to read. The four words that would make everything, both joys and sorrows, simply fly away.

I'm coming home, Tubbo.

He waited, he read avidly, but as the letters continued to come with no sign of repentance, he let his drive dwindle. He eventually gave up altogether. Puffy had left, and that was that. She wasn't coming back.

He had understood long ago wishful thinking never truly helped anyone, least of all someone like him. Perhaps that was the moment he finally finished growing up.

"She got married a couple of months ago," he continued. "I'm not surprised. I should have seen it coming a long time ago."

"Does that make you angry?"

Tubbo took a moment to mull over Aimsey's question and his subsequent answer. He realized it wasn't as easy to unravel as he originally thought it would be.

"No," he finally decided. "It doesn't. I'm happy she's happy, and I know Sam would never hurt her."

"So what is it? What's wrong?"

"She's happy, and that's the thing. She's happy *without* me."

There, that was it. The truth, once hidden and now allowed to bloom. He would just have to live with the rot it left in its wake.

"Have you ever lived your entire life believing one thing, then suddenly discover something that changes it all, only to have it disappear under your very nose? That's what happened to me. My whole life, I thought Philza was my father and my mother had died—why else would we have never talked about her? Then I find out that not only is my mother alive and living in the SMP, but my father was one of the worst and ruthless rulers the world has ever known. He executed me in front of the whole of L'Manberg. I almost followed in his footsteps when I became President. And my mother? She just up and leaves one day down the line, just like that. If she thinks letters will make me forgive her for that, she's sorely mistaken. People argue that she asked me to go with her and I refused—and yes, while that's true, I couldn't. I have a family too, and they're here in the SMP. I am not going to do what my father did, and I'm not going to copy my mother either. I've vowed I'm going to be better than them both, mark my words. If you've ever had a parent like that, you'll know what I mean."

At his words and passing assumption, Aimsey abruptly lost focus and looked down, down into the cream-coloured abyss of one of the letters in front of her.

"I don't, then. I don't have any parents. I don't even think I have a proper family."

"That's impossible," Tubbo remarked sharply. Almost rudely. "Everyone has a family."

Even the most ruthless of villains Tubbo had known and fought had families. Wilbur was Philza's son and for a while, was Tubbo and Tommy's brother. Even Dream had a sister, he was pretty sure. But having no family at all? That was impossible. You couldn't not have one, even if you disowned it like Sam had, or pretended you didn't have one at all as Tommy had done.

Right?

"My earliest memory was being alone," Aimsey told him, her gaze still turned away. "I had to fend for myself since I was a baby, and somehow I managed. There was no one else around me; no warren, no kind and familiar faces. Only predators. We didn't help each other among prey either. We hid, we threw each other into harm's way if we had to. It was each to their own. None of us had a family, and we didn't know what friends were either. We survived on our own, and only the luckiest made it through. I've never had a family. I've always had myself, and myself alone."

She faltered, then glanced back up at him. Her eyes were wide, frightened. She was trembling, and for a second Tubbo wondered if he was one of the predators she so feared. It was the same look everyone gave Schlatt whenever they had crossed his path. It was the same one Tommy gave him when Tubbo exiled him. He was being stared at like he was a monster.

No, never again.

He knew all too well what it was like to survive and fight for every one of his breaths. However, he didn't know what it was like to do so completely and utterly alone. He needed to, one day.

He sat down beside her and invited her to continue with a silent, reassuring nod. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed hard.

"If you tried to follow me home, I wouldn't know where to lead you," she whispered. "Even here in the SMP, I'm sleeping in the bushes and taking meals in someone else's home. I'm an outcast even when I'm accepted by someone, anyone."

"You're not an outcast."

"I'm friends with someone everyone only sees as a murderer; of course I am. You saw the way Ranboo looked at me."

"He's just under a lot of stress right now," Tubbo tried to tell her as a way of weakened explanation. "Kinoko still hasn't sent any word."

"No, it's not that. I know hatred when I see it. I'm alone again, and everything wants to kill me. I was born into nothing, with no one by my side for most of my life. At least you have something, someone, even if she lives far away now. You can cling to her, even if it's just in memory or with letters. I can't do that. You're luckier than I'll ever be."

Lucky, lucky.

She had a strange definition of luck, that was for sure.

"Eryn killed Sapnap because Sapnap sentenced him to death first."

Tubbo abruptly snapped his head up. "What?"

Aimsey's voice had never been so assertive, so sure of herself and what she was saying. It all seemed to pour out of her like a broken dam, a released river rushing through rocks of uncertainty.

"I promised I wouldn't say anything about this, ever, but sometimes you need to break promises for a good reason. Eryn killed Sapnap because he felt he had to."

The ram put down his papers. "It was a freak attack dealt to the wrong person."

It was, or so everyone had said. Reflecting on the incident, it didn't make sense. A bounty hunt, many claimed, as the murderer apparently knew his victim's name. Others theorized about some sort of unexplained, feral fireborn behaviour where they fought for territory. Some suggested it was even a case of mistaken identity. There were snippets of proof to back all suppositions, but something still didn't sit right with Tubbo. Sapnap was a good fighter. He wasn't old, he wasn't injured. He would have never lost a fight against a younger stranger unless...

Unless.

Unless there was something to it all else no one knew about. No one except one single soul.

Tubbo listened to Aimsey carefully.

"Eryn was born into power, which admittedly isn't how stories like this tend to go. He was the apple of his parents' eyes and their noble entourage—which was strange, considering he was born with fire abilities. Did his mother have an affair? Was he cursed? No one knew, but because he was the master's son, he was loved unconditionally and lived in luxury, unlike the rest of the fireborns who worked for the estate. None of the slaves dared to even look his way for fear of being punished in turn. All but one.

Sapnap was the master's favourite, as far as favourite slaves could go. He was used for fire shows and entertainment rather than loitering in filth with the rest of the ashes. He was still beaten, they all were, but he still dared to approach Eryn. He smiled at him, played with him when no one was looking and became his best friend. He cared for him when everyone else was busy, and in return Eryn adored him senselessly. Sapnap was an older brother to him, a ray of sun in a dark desolate world where he had nothing else but feeble riches and duties he never wanted. Sapnap shared in Eryn's sadness, and even in his moments of joy, and in return Eryn became enchanted by Sapnap's anger at the system he was trapped in and dreams of escape. Eryn hadn't known how badly the staff—the slaves—were treated until he heard the horror stories from one's very own, honest lips. They talked about it a lot, and Eryn soon began to resent everything about his life—his food, his clean room, even the entertainment at parties because in the end all of them were products of forced and violently reprimanded labour. If one fireborn was loved and cherished, why were the rest whipped and left to rot? It made no sense. Why couldn't Sapnap be his brother, let alone his friend? Why was everything between them so different? He didn't want it to be. He wanted to escape it all. They even made a blood pact. They'd make it out together, no matter what.

But when the time did come, Sapnap left him behind. Instead of helping Eryn out through the window in time to flee the patrols, Sapnap shut it behind him and ran. He left Eryn to the mercy of their master, his own father, who had suddenly turned against his adored son. Suddenly, it seemed to matter that Eryn was a fireborn, and he was punished for it. His son's life and well-being, all to get a single slave back. It was monstrous. Still Eryn wouldn't give up anything. He still believed it was all a part of a heroic plan for Sapnap to come back and save him, and he kept his chin up. His father didn't like that, and he beat him down harder than ever before.

Eryn was just a child, and they took two of his lives before he was nine. *Nine*, Tubbo. He was old enough to know what torture was, but he was still young enough to wait ceaselessly for Sapnap. He had promised he'd give him a good life. Eryn was waiting for it, but it never came. Sapnap had left him to

rot. Idolisation turned to doubts, and doubts turned to anger. Sapnap betrayed him."

Her recount was told with the same narrative flair of a novel. Tubbo had a hard time processing it all. "How do you know all this?"

"When I said I never had anyone, that wasn't completely true. I have Eryn. He saved my life. It took us both so long to trust another person again, but we did. He told me everything, thinking I'd leave him too before it was too late. I didn't. I stood by him then, and I will still stand by him now. He's not a monster, and he doesn't deserve to be treated like one.

Have you visited the prison? I did, thanks to you, and I don't know what they're doing to him in there but he's broken. Gods, he's been torn down completely. He couldn't even talk to me. He was crying! He's never cried before. Eryn's not evil, Tubbo, he's just angry. He's angry he was betrayed by the one he loved most in the world, and thought the only way of making it worth it was killing him. He doesn't deserve to be tortured the way he is, no one does."

"He still killed someone."

"So has everyone in the SMP, from everything you've told me, right? And they're allowed to live with no consequences; some are even seen as heroes. Someone else in Eryn's position would have done the same, wouldn't they?"

Tubbo wouldn't have, but he had known someone who probably would.

He mulled over the tale of woe, replacing every mention of Eryn with Tommy. Tommy, not evil but an angry, betrayed child who was forced to survive. He had killed, he had maimed, he had sought his own revenge many times, and yet many still believed he deserved happiness.

Yet Tubbo still loved him. He was still his best friend, even in death.

He was a hero bathed in the blood of dozens, maybe even hundreds. He was carved out by a violent existence Fate had thrust upon him.

So was Eryn, apparently. Was there really so much of a difference between them both, except for the legacy each of them seemed to be slathered with by the people.

"He's all I have left," Aimsey said, "I can't have him crumble the way he is..."

"Ranboo rarely listens to anyone anymore," Tubbo told her regretfully. "Even if I asked him to lay off, he probably wouldn't. He'd make up some excuse about security concerns."

A flash suddenly crossed his mind, and he faltered. His mouth ran dry, as did his train of thought. His idea was the only thing still in his brain, pulsating and beating to the quickening rhythm of his heart.

A Tommy-esque plan began to form.

It was ridiculous, improbable, and above all an irreversible act of treachery—to Kinoko, to Karl, to the SMP, to his own morals, and especially to Ranboo himself.

Tubbo, I can trust you, right?

"We could break him out."

"Found it!" Michael yelled, barrelling back into the room with a heavy book tucked under his arm. He heaved it onto the table, oblivious to Aimsey's shocked squeal towards his father's words, and started to flip through the pages.

For a second, Tubbo was freed from his damning chains and allowed to turn his attention onto something else.

As Michael turned the pages, he began to reel off everything he knew about each entry. Some of the words in the text were still far too complicated for him to understand at his age, but the stories his fathers had told him and the pictures he paired with them were enough to paint a detailed recount of the SMP's history. There had been a great many books chronicling the SMP's lore, from the settlement of the Original Eight around the lake up to the last Great Battle. More editions came out year after year, adding more and more, rectifying mistakes and shedding new light on the past. Tubbo and Ranboo probably owned six different volumes, each with their own discrepancies and mysteries within their pages.

One minute, Ranboo was painted as nothing but New L'Manberg's secretary. The next he was described as a traitor who tried to break Dream out of the Vault. Then, he was back to being an afterthought. Tubbo could only wonder what his next fame would be in the future, what all of theirs would be.

Tubbo had been draped with just as many colours and decorations as Ranboo had been, fluctuating between a sweet L'Manberg soldier with a fondness for bees to a calculated and loyal spy, to a cold and cruel President who'd let his best friend die for a single scrap of dignity. He was certainly

better off than Tommy, however, who was slandered as a villain as much as he was hailed a saviour.

As Michael went through their newest edition, eagerly trying to get to Technoblade, Tubbo couldn't help but take note of all his friends and family's segments. It took him less than two minutes to realize they were all unfairly balanced.

Fundy, who had been an important catalyst in his father Wilbur's story and in L'Manberg's Doomsday loss, was mentioned by name only once in a short segment about the latter. Sam had a whole chapter dedicated to himself and his Vault. Dream had three. Velvet had none. Puffy had nothing but a couple of short paragraphs and brief snippets here and there, and a single portrait sketch to capture her likeness.

For the first time in a while, he felt defensive. The great Captain Puffy, considered to be worth nothing but a couple of sentences, a practically disposable cog in the Egg's own defeat? She *started* the whole revolt. She was a hero, so much more than many others. To see her remembered in a History book with so little care made him bristle, and it was likely an amount of words that would continue to fade as Time went on and she faded more and more from the SMP's memory.

Eret's museum better be a bloody good one to try and keep the crumbling pieces together.

As his contempt for the numerous anonymous authors continued, it took him a good half an hour to realize Aimsey wasn't paying attention to Michael's ramblings at all. Tubbo found her staring straight at him, mouth agape, her silence crammed with thousands of questions.

Oh, right.

He had almost—and willingly—forgotten.

"That's great, Michael," he said, regretfully cutting off his son in the middle of his recount of one of his favourite Technoblade stories. "Could we maybe do this later?"

Michael pouted. "Why?"

"Aimsey and I have work to do."

"Work? What work? She's not—"

Tubbo gave him a piercing stare. It wasn't something he was forced to do often, but it was the rarity that made it so effective. Michael quietly stopped talking, took the book back off the tabletop and clambered down from the chair with it in his arms.

"You know what, that story is better as a comic," he said, as if he needed some sort of clever excuse to obey his father. "I'll just go draw that now."

Michael was a good kid, a great one even. Tubbo trusted him enough to understand when he wasn't wanted in a conversation and to not eavesdrop behind his back. It meant he could be as loud as he wanted.

He didn't even have the time to tell Aimsey that before she completely flared up with questions.

"Break him out? What do you mean, break him out?"

"I mean go to prison and help him escape."

"Tubbo—"

"It's the only way we can stop him getting mistreated. Asking Ranboo nicely won't do anything."

"But they'll kill him if they find out he got out! He's got one life left, they'll kill him for good!"

"I thought you wanted him out of there."

"I do, but not if Death is waiting for him as soon as he steps outside! The prison might be the safest place for him."

"He's going to rot there forever," Tubbo finally told her bluntly, his words falling like an anvil on top of both their heads. "Everyone knows Kinoko isn't going to do anything about him now. Karl hasn't had the heart to punish a criminal since his last false accusation got his kingdom burned down. Their justice is the Vault's torture. It always has been. Eryn will not leave that place unless it's in a coffin, and even then I doubt Ranboo would dare take the risk. He's trapped there forever, and I swear to the gods it's not safe. No matter what you think, that prison has taken more lives and limbs than you could possibly imagine. It took one of Tommy's last and it almost killed its last Warden. If we don't get him out, Eryn is going to live in hell for the rest of his days."

Almost everything he told her were assumptions. They were theories constructed by rumours among the SMP's inhabitants, and the brief but

worried letters he exchanged with some of the other leaders about the issue. When he briefly visited Kinoko, apart from the new statue of Sapnap that overlooked the library and cherry tree, Tubbo saw nothing pertaining to the recent events, nor any move to punish the culprit. Kinoko Kingdom was simply moving on as they could. The ram would have gone to see their leader, but was advised against it by the Kinoko Council itself. Karl rarely came out from the library anymore, rarely talked to anyone except for his advisors. The added disappearance of his closest friend George seemed to have also borne painful weight that only added on to his grief. There was no telling if Karl Jacobs would ever be the man he was again, and no one was brave or foolish enough to try and find out.

It was all hypothetical, but it was obvious to even the blindest.

Pandora's Vault was Eryn's punishment and once he was out of sight, he was simply out of mind entirely.

Tubbo knew that, and evil villain or not—likely not, if Aimsey's words were to be trusted—it was one of the cruelest fates one could imagine for someone. Everyone had seen how that had affected Dream, and perhaps even more tragically how it had corrupted the Wardens who had and currently were guarding it.

Sam had managed to escape its hold, physically at least. Ranboo on the other hand had fallen right into the same trap. It was as if he was disappearing into black quicksand, sinking faster than Tubbo could pull him out. Before long, he'd lose his grip on him entirely.

And then?

If what happened to Sam was any indication of the possibilities, Tubbo didn't want to know.

By freeing Eryn, he could save Ranboo. Maybe that was what had pushed him to suggest a break-out. Maybe it *wasn't* about a familiar parallel between Eryn and Tommy after all.

Of course it is.

That was what Tommy would do. Tubbo wanted to honour that. He could kill two birds with one stone, or rather save two souls with one action.

However, he couldn't do it alone. Well, he could, but that wasn't the point.

He had to wait for Aimsey. Despite her pleas for saving Eryn's well-being, she was still clearly on the fence. Her silence was hard to read, and her gaze

even more so when she turned it away. She bit her lip. She wriggled her nose. She twitched her ears. Her leg tapped against the leg of her chair. Tubbo still didn't know her well enough to know what those signs meant. Even her scrunched up face gave him no indication of her divided thoughts, if there were any at all. She could have already decided, and was just scared to tell him.

"The choice is yours, Aimsey," he reminded her, "but whatever happens, I'm on your side. In the end, you know him better than I do. I'm only giving you one option among many."

He waited for another minute, then two.

"I'll... I'll think about it," she finally said.

He would give her all the time she needed.

Aimsey left soon after, only staying long enough to see Michael's art and draw one more of her own. She seemed almost desperate to get out of there, her escape apparently favoured over Eryn's. Tubbo wasn't dumb. He knew full well why she ran, but he didn't chase after her.

The choice was hers. She was the catalyst, the general. He was but a lowly soldier awaiting her command—it was not the first time he had been.

Back during the days of L'Manberg's revolution, when he was barely nine, he had learned in times of unknowing between battles and training sessions, boredom became the enemy. That very same boredom could turn into panic attacks, doubts or existential crisis, and those in turn sometimes pushed recruits to all-out desertion. Occupying one's self was key, temporarily switching gears to not run down the warring drive.

Tubbo did just that. Once Snowchester business was wrapped up for the evening, he found himself doing something he wouldn't think he'd build up the courage or will to do.

With Aimsey's words ringing in his ears, he wrote a personal, heartfelt letter to his mother.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Never Forget

A year passed in the blink of an eye.

Then, another one did too.

Nothing much happened during that time. The people of the SMP lived their lives. The Vault was still guarded relentlessly, its prisoner always locked up tightly inside. Everyone had almost forgotten about Eryn by that point.

Almost everyone.

Tubbo had been pressing Aimsey for an answer to his suggestion for the better part of eighteen months. She in turn had been purposely dodging the question. Eventually, he stopped, and she was clearly glad for it. No more was said about it, but it was certainly thought about in private.

All the festering rot was doing so in silence, beneath skin and behind averted eyes. Peace had been secured, but something about it was off. Dread lurked regardless and although many felt it, they didn't know why it was. When dread ran amok, so did doubts, and when doubts resurfaced, so did realization, fear and open confession.

"I've given up."

"Given up?" echoed Hannah, curious and confused. "What do you mean you've given up?"

Niki wasn't even looking at her. "I don't think I completely understand it either. I've fought in battles, been cut down and threatened and shunned, and yet this is where I draw the line. Why? How? I think I have an answer, or part of one. There's a time when you realize you can struggle and persevere all you want and it won't pay off anymore. That time has come for me."

"Is this about Ranboo?"

"Among other things. When someone refuses to listen, there's only so much you can do for them, and the sculk has been living its life in peace—Sapnap was right. There's no point in fighting things that don't want to or can't be fought. I think it's time I retire."

"Retiring is for old people," Hannah reminded her, attempting to tease. "You're not senile, are you?"

The remark made Niki smile just a little. "Sometimes I feel like I am. I've still got three lives ahead of me and I've been wasting most of my energy on one of them. Now I want to live out the rest to the fullest. I don't want to go searching for fights anymore. I'll wait until they come to me, if at all."

"And how long do you think you'll wait?"

"With you close by, probably less than five minutes."

"Hey!" Hannah beat Niki over the head with her wings. "I've improved, you've said so yourself!"

"It took you six months to learn how to properly make a pretzel!"

"But I learned it," she challenged proudly.

"It still took you six months. I'm going to spend the rest of my lives teaching you how to cook, aren't I?"

"Is that such a painful punishment?"

The fairy waited for her friend's answer, with a smile but also with nervous, fumbling fingers.

Niki turned to her, looked her up and down. The fondness in her eyes was a sight to behold. "You know what, it isn't. I wouldn't rather do anything else."

Hannah certainly felt her heart flutter, as well as her wings and the flower petals. When Niki had praised her work for the first time, she had felt it too, and at first the roses had tried to persuade her this was love. Romantic love, that was. It was how all the stories and fae gossip described it. It had to be, and for a while Hannah believed it. She believed a lot of things, and to her romantic love was one of the most magical there could be.

However, as time went on, she took time to really pay attention to what she felt, and how she felt it. The step-back and reflection was mostly due to a random bakery customer whom she had confided in one day.

"You might not love Niki in *that* way," Skeppy said, leaning against the till.

Hannah didn't understand. "*That* way?"

"Romantically, like you want to kiss her or marry her among other things."

The blunt mentions had certainly taken her aback, that was for sure. She realized that none of them had ever so much as crossed her mind. All she had were the loving jitters running throughout her body and her roses, nothing more.

Skeppy shrugged. "It's not as weird as it sounds. Bad and I aren't involved—"

"You're not?"

"—but that doesn't stop us from loving each other. You can love in many ways, Hannah." He picked up his pastries and gave her a tip. "You just need to find which kind suits you both."

She did just that, privately of course. She felt like a detective, scoping out clues and keeping her head low as she investigated herself further. It took a while, but eventually she found the answers she needed. They suited her quite well.

"You're my best friend."

"Is that an order?" Niki had asked, laughing.

"Nope, it's an affirmation. You're my best friend."

"I have never felt so threatened by a promise of friendship."

Well, that was love for you.

Nevertheless, she had accepted Hannah's decision with soft teasing and even softer eyes.

That was how the two of them were here, two years later, joking about pretzels despite the lugubre circumstances preceding it. Hannah had given up her quaint fae community for an apron, a busy bakery and a sweet, pink-haired angel. She had never felt happier.

As her care grew for Niki, however, so undoubtedly did her worry. Today was one of those days. Although they didn't come around often, they were still hectic enough mentally for both of them.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Hannah couldn't help but check yet again.

"I will be once I let everything blow over."

Niki's eyes drifted to the window, taking Hannah's gaze with her. A tall, lanky shadow draped in a heavy cape stepped off the Prime Path and through the bakery door. They had to duck to fit both their head and the tip of their sharp weapon through.

"I'd like to get some, uh, muffins, please. If that's alright. Please."

For a feared Warden, he was awfully shy and polite. As Niki complied silently, Hannah simply stared.

She had never been in the Vault, but she had been friends with Sam. She, like everyone else, was aware of what happened to Dream on the other side of those walls, and Tommy too. She knew what that place did to people. From the deep bags under Ranboo's eyes and the haunted veil draping them, it seemed not much had changed since.

"Hannah."

Niki nudged her, holding out a pair of tongues. Hannah quickly averted her gaze and her thoughts. She focused intently on putting half a dozen muffins into the brown bag in Niki's hands, then kept her head down even as she handed them to him. She was about to mumble out the price, but Niki got there first.

"It's on the house."

Ranboo shuffled. "Why?"

"It's the least I can do for a good friend."

Silence.

Then...

"It's fine, I'll pay."

"Ranboo, no."

Money clanked around and glittered on the countertop. "That's six, and each costs about—"

"No." Niki pushed the coins back towards him. "It's on the house."

"You said it's on the house for good friends."

"Exactly!"

"I'm not a good friend."

A coin clattered, spinning on itself before falling heads down beside Niki's hand. Its vibrations still echoed in the silence that ensued.

Hannah finally looked up properly again. Ranboo was glaring at Niki, eyes narrowed. His mouth was still covered by his heavy scarf, but she could easily imagine the pursed lips that strained the rest of his face. It was an expression familiar to Hannah, although she had only played around with it

in jest. Ranboo's own was very much serious. He was challenging Niki, daring her to speak her mind, to contradict him.

Niki was made of stronger than a simple glare, even when that glare in particular came from the Warden himself. With an even more piercing stare and a tense hand, she slid the coins back over to him.

"No you're not," she told him firmly. "With all this prison stuff and you refusing to take a step back and see sense, I feel like giving up on you. I think I have, for now. But good or not, you're my friend regardless. I will wait until you come back to me, Lethe, but I won't go looking when you don't want to be found. Any baked goods you want are on the house. Is that clear?"

Hannah was frightened he was going to snap, his muscles twitching with spasms experience had shown her were difficult to keep in check even on the best of days. But Niki was powerful in her own right, her sharp words enchanting those who heard them. Even the Warden seemed unable to refuse.

Ranboo nodded slowly.

"Do you have your memory book on you?"

He nodded again, "Always."

"Good. Give it to me." Niki held out her hand.

Ranboo didn't move. "There's sensitive information in there. To let an outsider read it would pose a security—"

"That prison is impenetrable and you published a whole pamphlet confessing to your confidential crimes. Don't give me any nonsense about secrecy."

She waited, drumming her fingers against the countertop. Again, Ranboo looked like he was about to refuse, but something made him fold. He bowed his head and handed his journal to Niki, who thanked him sharply and opened it to a blank page. Grabbing a pencil from the pot by the till, she scribbled down a couple of lines, signed them, and handed it back.

Ranboo looked down and read. Hannah once again watched his expression shift. His tail whipped out from beneath his cloak, the fluffy dust brush end more like a spiked mace ready to clobber both bakers. He closed the book and stashed it away. He picked up his bag without dragging his eyes from Niki, mumbled something under his breath Hannah swore sounded like an embarrassed apology, and left the shop. Once his silhouette had disappeared

into the bustling crowds on the Prime Path—parting like the Red Sea and letting him through with deference—the two of them quietly got back to work.

It was while she was wiping the counter after closing that Hannah finally found the courage to speak up.

"What did you write?"

Niki was taking on a particularly difficult grease stain on one of the windows, a job neither they nor Velvet had wanted to take on—until now, apparently. Something was definitely off.

""You're not a good friend and you're not alright, but you can get better,"" Niki quoted without taking her eyes or her hands off her task. ""I'll always have a cookie ready for you when you do.""

"Why did you write it?"

"No one can really trust Ranboo's short-term memory, least of all himself. It's simply a memo for when this incident gets erased from his mind. Sam did the same when Ranboo was blaming himself for Tommy's death; he took the book and wrote in it. It helped for a while, and a while is all we can hope for. There's not much else we can do for him."

"Why did you call him Lethe?"

She wringed out her cloth into a bucket and went right back to wiping the glass. "To help him remember."

"I thought you said he had memory problems."

"Some things you can't forget even if you try."

A harsh and bleak statement, to be sure, but one that nonetheless begged for no more follow-up questions. The finality in Niki's tone made it clear, and Hannah obeyed half-heartedly.

"Wow, I feel like I've missed a festive chapter." Velvet walked in, glancing from one woman to the other. "What happened?"

"Nothing, just a hard day," Niki replied. "We thought you were needed for Badlands business."

"Not anymore: the bank has finally been sorted. This time next month, if everything goes smoothly between the other leaders in tomorrow's meeting, people will be paying in the same currency!"

That was certainly news to behold.

"You've finished Sam's bank?" Hannah gasped. "Really?"

"The *Badlands*' bank: Sam only drew up the first few concept sketches and the outlines of the economic system."

As far as Hannah was concerned, that made it his. "This is the start of true unity in the SMP, isn't it?"

"True unity?" Niki shrugged. "Maybe. Who knows if it will last?"

"I believe it will," Velvet said.

Hannah was inclined to agree, although Niki's own doubt still festered in her mind. Every time the SMP looked to be at peace, something came along to topple it all. Sarnap's death had been the latest one and after two years of tranquility, it felt almost strange nothing had come to disturb it as such. It was almost sad, the way they were all conditioned to fear the worst no matter what.

Even Hannah felt the strain.

"Well, I think it's worth celebrating regardless." Velvet reached into his hammer and took out a bottle. "Champagne anyone?"

Niki tensed up. "I don't drink it anymore," she said in a hoarse voice, then cleared her throat. "I have some juice in the back though. Want some, Hannah?"

"Sure," the fairy cried, perking up, "why not?"

In this little time pocket of happiness, it was probably best not to tell them about the young buds growing out from the sculk.

Technology could be dangerous, but the driving forces behind it beautiful.

Redstone was beautiful, although few truly got to see it for what it was. Many thought it was simply a means to an end, but Sam knew better. He knew better the very day he pulled a handful of the powdered red ore up from

their makeshift mine at the start of the SMP. He knew there was something more to it all, something special.

His seven other friends had told him he was crazy. Again, Sam knew better. He took a risk by searching for answers, and it paid off once he found the Hermitcraft Academy. The redstone engineering school was an oasis in the middle of a dry desert of ignorance, and he drank aplenty. He was so addicted to it he spent five years studying there, and another two in an elite finishing school where he became a Grand Master. Following that, he had been certain his life would become very different, and he was right. Just not in the way he planned.

War took over any engineering drive he had. The calls for his knowledge were few and far between, and meant only to attack or defend. Not to provide, not to heal, just as appendages to armies and revolutions. Only once was he asked to make entertaining displays for a festival, once. And when it wasn't the SMP's turmoil dragging him down, it was the lack of redstone mines and stable surfaces on the ocean.

He had promised he'd get to use his title for good one day, for what it was really made for, and he'd help others do the same.

"Grand Master Fundy, huh? It has a nice ring to it."

"I never got to properly thank you for that letter of recommendation." Fundy's tail wagged behind him. "Thank you, Cogchamp is the best school I could have ever dreamed of attending."

"Glad to hear it! It's good to see you again. Are you staying long?"

"Less than a week, I think. I'm not here on business, I'm on my honeymoon."

"Wow, congratulations!"

Just a few years ago, Fundy was still a young and shy fox looking for retribution. Now here he was, his sad gaze sly and sharp, all traces of his father's brash influence gone, bearing the same engineering rank as Sam and with a son in hand.

The little white cub by his side clenched his father's paw tighter, staring up at Sam with stars in his eyes. He was not in awe of him because he was a king, but undoubtedly because Fundy had painted him a picture of a man and a friend.

Sam knelt down to the cub's height. "What's your name?"

The little white fox brightened up. "Yogurt," he cried out with a toothy smile, canines still not grown in fully yet.

"It's a nickname," Fundy chuckled sheepishly.

"You're tall," squealed the cub.

"Yogurt! That's no way to talk to a king!"

Faced with Fundy's scandalized expression, Sam couldn't help but laugh. "It's fine, he's right. I'm very tall." He ruffled the top of Yogurt's head. "You're very smart, just like your father."

"I'm going to be a Grand Master like him one day!"

"If you work hard and follow your dreams, there's no reason why you wouldn't."

Teaching the new generation was a blessing, and one day when the South's redstone academy picked up in popularity, there was a chance they'd be training future legends as well. Fundy's son would be one of them, perhaps.

In these noisy halls and workshops, he'd learn with the same vivacious appetite as both Sam and Fundy themselves did. He'd climb the ranks, he'd build wonders, he'd get a diploma and he'd go on to do great things. Yogurt, and all the other students that would come through the academy's doors.

Sam wanted to be the reason the world was opened to the next generations. Knowledge was precious, and learning to use and share it even more so.

"You're not a messiah, Sam."

"I never said I was!"

"You're implying it, it's embarrassing."

"All I'm saying is that I've brought the redstone religion to the South! I'm spreading the good word!"

"Techno, help me out here," Puffy sighed.

"I don't think you need me," the piglin grunted, undoubtedly eating the whole teasing argument up, "you're winning pretty well on your own."

Sam rolled his eyes. "The two of you are always conspiring against me. Watch it; it might be seen as high treason."

"Oh please," Techno chuckled, "if we wanted to dethrone you, I would have done it months ago with no problems."

"I can *literally* beat you in one on one combat now," Sam pointed out proudly. "You've softened."

"I could still take you down in ten seconds if I wanted to," Techno grunted, only mildly offended, "but Puffy probably could do it in less with nothing but a single kiss."

"Love me into submission? I'd like to see her try."

"That could be arranged," Puffy hummed beside him, running a fingernail up his throat and under his chin. Her smirk alone was enough to dazzle him with distraction.

Sam choked, red, and could no longer look any of them in the eye.

Techno snickered. "There goes one more point to Puffy."

"What are you talking about?" Michelle asked, tuning in to their conversation.

Oh no, Sam wasn't ready to go *there* yet.

"Nothing, princ—"

His voice faltered on the nickname, quickly catching himself.

Michelle looked his way and smiled, bright and warm and always so forgiving. "It's fine, I like it when you call me that," she said, to her father but also to her mother and her uncle. "Just not when others do."

Sam would be lying if he claimed he hadn't noticed. Every time someone would bow and curtsy Michelle's way, every call of her title instead of her name, how some of his advisors and courtiers would stop her and casually ask her a deeply political question she could only nervously stammer out an answer to and had her running to her mother or father to ask about. No wonder she escaped to the guard's quarters whenever she could—at least there she was treated the way she wanted.

The King and Queen, and Technoblade too, had privately told off their entourage many times about harassing their daughter the way they were, whether it was intentional or not. The two of them weren't going anywhere, the throne was secure: let their heir live out the rest of her childhood in peace. That peaceful chance was a precious one they finally managed to give her, a stable life being a blessing to the well-being of their family.

Innocent youth was a fragile thing, fleeting, and rare were the opportunities to make the most of it. They would not let their daughter needlessly miss out, not like their sons had.

"Can I come here again?" Michelle asked, bounding back by his side and changing the subject. "I haven't done any redstone in ages!"

"You haven't?"

"I've been training," she said, brightening again. She always did when her favourite pastime was involved. "Seepeekay wants to take me on a real patrol soon!"

"She's capable enough," Techno added, as if any of them needed confirmation.

"I know she is."

"Then wipe that cloud off your face."

Sam didn't realize how pinched his expression was until the piglin mentioned it. "Alright, just be careful when you do," he told his daughter. "Don't fight unless you absolutely need to and listen to anything Seepeekay tells you to do. If he tells you to run, you run, okay?"

"Sam," Puffy laughed, "I think she gets it."

Michelle nodded in excited agreement. It was fairly obvious she mainly cared about the fact her father had said "alright". His concerns and conditions were just afterthoughts.

Sam still couldn't bring himself to completely let the whole thing go. He did for the time being, but as he watched Michelle happily trot away to an inviting pair of double doors at the end of the corridor, the storm cloud settled again.

Technoblade nudged him. "A baby bird has got to fly the nest at some point."

"She's still my daughter," he replied, biting the inside of his cheek.

He knew the dangers of being too protective over something, but also not doing enough to keep them safe. If he had acted back then with that knowledge now, there would be a high chance things would have turned out much differently. Tommy would be alive and well, for instance. That alone was enough to push Sam to change his tune. He would not make the same mistakes as before.

"Michelle will be fine, Sam, trust me," Techno continued. "I know what a warrior looks like, and your little girl is definitely on the right path. She's skilled and she's smart, just like her parents taught her to be. Trust yourselves a little, for gods' sakes. You're doing fine."

"He's right, you know."

Puffy's fingers entwined with Sam's own and lightly squeezed his hand. "She's growing up, Sam. Let her have a bit of freedom."

"She's twelve."

"We're not letting her fight in a war," Puffy reminded him, "but we're letting her broaden her horizons. She's found something she loves to do, so who are we to take that from her?"

"Exactly," Technoblade grunted.

Sam was still a little apprehensive. "It seems like yesterday I could still hold her in my arms," he mused, "and now... I feel like I'm not doing enough."

"Hey," Puffy said, "you are doing *more* than enough. You're a great father. She just needs a bit of space to find her own footing, alright? She's getting more and more independent."

It was a balance Sam never really found. Be too lenient and you were negligent and put your child in danger; get too involved, and you become controlling and overprotective. He was teetering between the two, unstable. His stance would slip, and one foot would fall harder on one side than it would the other. The fluctuating rhythm would muddle him up, and where there was confusion there was panic. A frantic mindset only brought out the darkest side of his thoughts, the strongest of which was inadequacy. Doubt crept in, and he would start to wonder if he was worthy of it, any of it at all.

Technoblade told him warmly but firmly he was just imagining things.

Michelle likely didn't understand it all, but she knew when her father was sad. She'd go to him and give him a hug, and they'd talk about anything to take his mind off things.

He'd only really confess it all to Puffy. She'd listen to him and frown, pained. It broke her heart to hear him think he was worthless. Then, she'd take his hand and kiss his wedding ring.

If the gods thought you weren't worthy of happiness, you wouldn't be where you are now, she'd say, pressing the backs of his fingers to her chest. *But*

they will never know or love you as much as I do. You'll always be worthy of my heart, no matter what.

"And that's another point to your wife, don't you think?"

Technoblade's interjection, upbeat and knowing, made Sam snort. Before he could go after him for it, the piglin flounced away to join Michelle, whose excited squeal and shout enticed him to hurry up.

They were about to go and join them when Puffy slowed Sam down by squeezing his hand again.

"I went to see the physicians," she whispered.

Immediately, Sam leapt to attention. "What did they say?"

They stopped. Puffy looked up at him. She shook her head, once again. Sam's heart sank a little. He leaned across and kissed the top of her head, the hand in her curls pulling her closer to him. It was quick, but meaningful.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, pushing against him.

"You need to stop blaming yourself," he replied. "It could be me, or it could be something we can't control. It's not you, and I never want you to think that. Ever. We can try again."

His answer was met with a small smile, but not much else. He could see in her eyes she was getting tired; tired of trying and building up hopes only for it to all come crashing down regardless. The rollercoaster was getting familiar, and even Sam was starting to feel the strain.

He loved her still as much, that wasn't part of the question. It was only the feeling that one of the most private parts of their life together was starting to feel like another obligatory chore, windows of rigorously scheduled intimacy with a goal that still hadn't been reached.

But for once, the royal couple was not being forced into something by their advisors or the will of the people. The throne, technically speaking, didn't need another heir. This was their own choice, their own desire, and unfortunately it seemed like Fate was not on their side.

"Maybe we're trying too hard. Let's just let it flow," Sam suggested, "alright? Go back to how we were before for a while: no strict timetables, no herbs, no outside advice. If it happens, it happens."

Her smile was still small, but had gotten a little brighter. "That sounds nice," she agreed. "Let's let it flow."

His hands drifted over her stomach, briefly hovering with a loving but regretful touch, before planting them firmly on either side of her waist. "I love you," he said.

Puffy stroked a hand down the back of his neck, "I love you too."

"Sam! When in the world were you going to tell us about this?"

Technoblade's shout from the room at the end of the hall brought them both back.

Oh, yeah.

This.

Puffy's eyes widened when they walked in behind the piglins. Her breath hitched.

"You like it?" Sam hummed, glancing at her.

"I thought you were kidding when you brought it up..."

"Darling, when do I ever joke about anything redstone-related?"

He did have to admit however she had a point. If he had openly admitted the project to anyone else but his team of redstone engineers, he would have been seen as crazy—a mad king was never a good look for any kingdom. Even then, he was sure his engineers thought he was insane too. Lo and behold, they achieved it anyway.

Look who was the madman now.

In the center of the circular room they filed into—already spectacular in its own right with carved columns, golden gilding and fresh frescoes—stood a massive copper device, at least ten times Techno's own size and certainly heavier than such. Shining thick strips of metal encircled the long composed cylinder propped up in the center, orbiting its form like how the planets orbited the sun or electrons the center of an atom. Set at a diagonal angle, the main centerpiece had more wheels, buttons, springs, cogs, levers and switches either of them would know what to do with. It was pointed up at the sky, out of an opened hatch in the domed ceiling, the rest of which was painted with a map of the heavens.

In the presence of the telescope's magnificence, Sam too held his breath in awe.

At last, a colossal wonder that provided something other than pain and strife.

He beckoned them closer to it. "Come on, it won't bite," he chuckled. "You'll want to see this."

He gestured to a glass lens poking out at the closest end. It was so minute compared to the rest of the machine and yet managed to open their eyes to a whole new world. They each had a turn, all except Sam who had been allowed his own private preview. He instead wanted to watch the new wonders painting themselves on his loved ones' faces.

Michelle, unsurprisingly, was the most openly excited of them all. She stared for a couple of seconds, squealed in delight and rushed to pull her mother and her uncle up for their turns. Her blabber afterwards was mainly excited gibberish as she tried and failed to grasp the awesome enormity of what she saw.

Technoblade spent a good thirty seconds looking, humming appreciatively and tweaking the meticulously calibrated settings as he pleased to get a better look, to the exasperation of the researchers around them. He pulled away, impressed, and gave the telescope a hearty pat on one of its metal sides.

Puffy was the last, but certainly not the least. As soon as she pressed her eye to the lens, she went still. Her face went lax, brightening with admiration and bewilderment.

"How come we can see them during the day?" she asked.

"Well, I think when the mechanics are powerful enough—"

She turned to him. "Think?"

Sam shrugged, sheepish. "I'll be honest, I wasn't directly involved in this project," he admitted. Royal business meant he was forced to step back from a few things, or at least not be completely in touch with them. "I will ask to go over the blueprints at some point, though. I've been meaning to get more involved. The point is now the South has redstone, we're moving towards an enlightened future. Not only are we creating a redstone emporium, but with what we have we can start moving on to so much more! New farming equipment! Mining machines! Ways to help us explore and understand the world!"

He gestured to the telescope as proof, the race to understand the vastness of the heavens above already well under way. The Old World had done it in the past, so why couldn't they?

This was what Sam had always dreamed of. The ability to use his redstone knowledge for good, peaceful means had been the prime driving force behind his studies and his relentless practicing of the craft. He had always been somewhat miffed that his biggest creations were the ones that had brought about the most destruction.

But the South provided a clean slate. Oh, he certainly loved his land and cared for it deeply, there was no question about that. Yet, the redstone ventures also made the South his own little playground—and being King gave him many liberties to experiment with. At last, he could deal with business other than military, share the knowledge he had pent up for so long, and show it all off to those he cared for.

The redstone knowledge that had garnered him a fearsome reputation in the past also brought beauty and virtue to the present.

"Just think of it: not only will we be a hub for mechanical innovation, but scientific as well. Already, astronomers and engineers are sailing in from overseas to work here, and we'll be able to provide everything they need. We are pioneering the first proper industrial age of the Four Kingdoms, and that's a huge advantage for all of us. Take the dukedom of Pixandria in the East, for instance: their main export is copper, and now with our redstone academy and workshops we're their main buyer. Pixandria is well-respected among the other empires, so a good alliance with them strengthens our bond with the East. King Wisp has shown interest in some of our draining machines to make the swamplands of the North less dangerous to cross and build on and while the West hasn't said anything explicitly, our ambassador has reportedly received favourable messages from the current king about it. That's a good sign, better than we could have hoped for. But most importantly, we're helping our people. We've created new jobs, eased back-breaking work and are opening up higher education possibilities that never used to exist before! We could even build a railroad across the kingdom, or branch out into Nether travel! This is good, this is great! This is what redstone is all about!"

Of course, they all already knew all of that, but he noticed they let him ramble on anyway. Michelle hung on eagerly to every word with wide eyes, Technoblade gave him an amused smirk, and Puffy watched on with an equally amused but also deeply fond gaze and slight tilt of her head.

"And not to mention what we're doing right now," Sam went on, turning back to the well-mannered chaos of the bustling astrology lab all around them.

"Astronomy is probably the most precise and complicated science we can ever study. We're tapping into the gods' domains, and yet they seem to be letting us. It's weird, right? And the planets are millions and millions of miles away, and yet we know more about them than we do some of our own earthbound magic and deepest oceans. It's fascinating! Space is endless, so we can keep studying it forever and never truly know so much as a speck of what it contains. It's a never-ending treasure hunt that has sparked theories and stories alike, and why we've spent millennia looking up to the heavens and talking about them. It's the ultimate eternal search for answers, and we're getting closer and closer to solving only a fraction of its mysteries. Astronomy is taking baby steps to piece together the history of forever and even if it seems impossible, we're still marching forward regardless. With the precise instruments and brilliant minds in this very room, we'll be able to truly find out what our beloved constellations are really made of in just a week or two. Balls of gas, or something else—?"

"Balls of gas? Yeah, right," Techno snorted, crossing his arms. "We all know what the Greeks believed, and all I'm saying is they were right about a lot of things."

"I haven't really thought of them as much," Puffy said. "Just points on a map in the sky, leading me where I needed to go."

"They might be alive," Michelle added in turn. "Listening to us and watching everything we do."

Sam only smiled and shrugged. "We could all be right, or we could all be wrong. There's no telling what the truth really is, but we like to get as close to it as possible."

There was only one real truth he didn't want anyone to debate on, one string of memories oblivion would twist if given the chance. After a year and a half in the making, in private, Sam had received whispered word that very morning it was finally done.

The visit to the academy was largely a distraction to blunt his excitement and stop him from bursting. He could go there himself, check it over and iron out any last-minute hiccups before he presented it to the wider world. The sudden thought of it returning to him, however, dashed all of that.

For once, screw his perfectionism.

"I have another surprise."

It wasn't redstone, this time.

They rode back to the palace, where Sam then led them to a pair of double doors set inconspicuously deep in its heart. They looked like all the others, at first glance, although Techno surprisingly seemed to have the floorplan memorized well enough to make a remark.

"The infamous out of bounds courtyard?"

"Not so out of bounds anymore."

He produced a golden key out of thin air and handed it to Michelle.

She didn't need telling twice.

Grabbing the key and inserting it into the lock, she used both hands to turn it. The polished panels and their mechanism groaned and clicked, and creaked as the princess slipped in. There was a gasp and a cry of awe, even bigger than the one that had escaped her in the redstone workshop.

Sharing a quick look, Techno and Puffy went in soon after, Sam closing the rear and the door behind them.

What lay beyond was worthy of the classic caprices of a monarch in all its forms. He had a whole inner courtyard transformed for it, spent a month planning it out to perfection, and oversaw the workload for two whole years without getting his hands dirty. It was unusual for him, the King always known to be hands-on and involved with the manual labour he decreed and paid for, but he didn't trust himself to do anything here. This was something only his eyes, his money and his mouth could help with. His hands were left fumbling anxiously with nothing hot air.

At first glance, the courtyard was just that: a courtyard. Perhaps cleaner than the last time anyone had seen it, but a courtyard nonetheless. It was only when one looked carefully at the new fountain that a chord was well and truly struck.

Puffy squinted. "Is that...?"

"L'Manberg," Sam confirmed, following her gaze, "yes."

The Badlands, Kinoko, Las Nevadas, the Antarctic Commune Snowchester and the Greater SMP were there too. All the flags from all the SMP's nations were there, carved into white marble, still material frozen in fluttering forms. All the flagpoles were planted into the center of the plinth, the corners of which spouted trickling jets of water into the turquoise pool below. The bottom was tiled with small mosaic shards laid out in the shape of golden lettering spelling out the names of each of the nations present.

"Nice memorial," Technoblade said.

Sam gestured to the whole courtyard around them. "You haven't even seen half of it."

The true magnificence of the project resided not in the fountain or tended greenery in the corners, but plastered on the walls beneath the arches. Where bricks, windows and doors to the rest of the castle had been were now smooth walls, and on those walls entire worlds were depicted.

Sam had hired the best artists in the kingdom to come and paint the murals that adorned the courtyard, and was admittedly the most nerve-wracking part of the whole thing. He had spent countless hours sitting by their sides as he told them the stories of the SMP in minute detail, as they drew up multiple concept sketches, as they began to sketch their final compositions on the walls and as their paint brushes began to carve out expressions. He had seen too many unnecessarily severe portraits and dreamy, unrealistic landscapes in his lifetime and although the talent and passion put into them was admirable, they simply would not do for in this case. Sam wanted something as close to reality as they could get, frescoes of photographic hyperrealism so detailed there would be little to no difference between them and the real things. He wanted the painters to show every scar, every blemish, every twisted or strained expression. The pain, the joy and the details of his own recounts became only that more important.

The memorial was not a show of godly perfection or glory, but a testament to truth and history. Any subsequent beauty would result from that honesty, and honesty alone.

Their walk through the painted mausoleum began in silence starting from the left side and looping over to the right. Even Michelle's excitability subdued, and she walked hand in hand with her father in quiet awe.

Lifetimes' worth of memories played out before them, both of their own and of others. It read out it as one large story strip, chronicling the entire history of the SMP from the quaint beginnings of the Original Eight to the final Great Battle against Dream's army of the undead. L'Manberg, November 16th, Doomsday, the Egg, the Red Banquet, the Vault; it was all there. Every event and every actor was there, unpolished, unglorified. As Sam had once written in a last minute will and testament, they were remembered just like how Sam himself wanted to be: three -dimensional, real.

The horrors were there: the blood, the war, the losses, the villainy and corruption. But so were the snippets of hope: the victories, the solidarity, the magnificence of mortal determination, the friendship and the love. The balance was what made it so heartbreaking and yet so delightful to look at.

None of them openly commented on any of it directly, all of them too engrossed in their own personal journeys to the past. Their only reactions were the small and silent quirks of expression: a mouth twitching into a smile, an eye turning a little glassy, or a shiver as slivers of old fears returned. They were reactions enough, and those were the only ones Sam got for a long while.

Then Michelle saw something up ahead and let go of his hand. "Is that Michael?" she cried, rushing over to the painted figure in question.

Almost like a magnet, her parents and her uncle followed her. The last big mural, filling the remaining wallspace, was a larger-than-life, portrait-like sequence of many pivotal figures in the SMP's history, as well as some others that still deserved a place. Michael was one of them.

The character towering above the little piglin earned Puffy's own undivided attention.

"Is that...?" she began.

"Tubbo," Sam finished for her.

Puffy stepped closer, eyes glistening as she scrutinized the figure of her son. Describing Tubbo—and anyone really—to the painters had been a challenge, because Sam's obvious affection for him tended to sway any description he'd give. Still, Sam was happy with the result. Tubbo was accurate, from his short but confident stature to the serious, sharp glint in his eyes.

Puffy gazed fondly for a few moments more and turned her head away, seemingly out of guilt. As she did, her eyes landed on the figure next to the ram's, and the beautiful little vase sitting on the floor beneath it. Fresh lilies and carnations spewed out of the mouth, laid by Sam that morning and promised to be regularly changed.

Puffy clapped a hand to her mouth and looked up. Crossing the bright blue gaze of the golden-haired boy on the wall only seemed to make her shake more.

Sam wrapped his arms around her from behind and kissed the nape of her neck. "No one will ever forget him, or anyone else ever again," he vowed.

"I just... I wish he was here to see this," she replied, her voice strained.

"He probably is," he said, pressing another kiss to her neck. This time, she shivered a little, and he immediately got the message. Reminding his wife of her near-death strangulation with paintings of the Red Banquet was perhaps

not the best idea he ever had. He replaced it with a peck on her shoulder instead. "They probably all are, in spirit and in our memory."

He tightened his hold on her. He spared a glance for Tommy, but Philza and Ponk's figures too, further along the fresco. Technoblade was glued to the avian's painting just as fiercely as Puffy and Sam did to their two sons', or Michelle with her best friend's. It almost seemed like Techno was taking it all a step further, so concentrated he looked like he was trying to get Philza to react or even talk to him.

Memory, legacy.

Perhaps some of the most powerful things to exist. After all, what was an enchanted blade compared to an eternal footprint on the world's mortal plain? A mark engraved so deep it would outlive flesh, bone, blood and likely soul as well. Because it was there forevermore, it was important to make it a good one.

Sam had left many marks on History, lots of which were less favourable than others. Only word of mouth would remember the day the whole SMP bowed to him and his friends for saving everyone from the Egg, but future generations would see the beast of Pandora's Vault lingering on the oceanline for themselves. Leaving a legacy was a risky game to play, but Sam was ready to play it.

He devoted the rest of his life to the South. He used his redstone knowledge for a lot of good. He spent countless hours on this courtyard memorial to his lives long past. His record would never be completely clean, and he didn't want it to be. However, his head and his heart begged him not to give up, not that he'd ever want to.

Part of Sam's legacy was helping others' be remembered, he was sure of it. He'd do anything to make that happen.

That night, Sam returned to the courtyard, and he reflected on that very thought. About ten minutes later, someone else joined him.

"I was wondering if you'd come to take another look," he said.

Technoblade stopped by his side and hummed. "It's nice to see me portrayed as something other than a weapon."

They were standing beside a painted scene of the arctic tundra. Techno, Ranboo and Phil were rushing over the ice on sleds drawn by thick-furred wolf dogs, laughing and smiling. Sam couldn't remember the last time he had seen any artwork of the piglin as happy and friendly as he was there. He

was only defined by many as the Blade, covered in blood and glory. The true nature of the piglin seemed to be a hidden sight, rarely glimpsed, often cast aside in favour of the horrifying legend.

A lot of Technoblade's history was hidden, willingly or not. There was only one secret fragment Sam was aware of, because it involved him too.

"I'm glad you're here. I have something to show you."

Sam led him to where the full length portraits sat and pointed to the oddly curved bracelets a few of the figures were wearing, pieces of jewelry unseen and unnoticed if one wasn't looking.

What at first glance looked like a design of vines and leaves in fact turned out to be letters, each curling with different sizes and abstract fonts. Looking closer, however, they made up proper words.

Names, with ancient roots and borne by heroes.

Lethe.

Nemesis.

Herostratus.

Daedalus.

Zephyrus.

And finally, Protesilaus.

Technoblade simply stared, but said nothing. A flash of doubt crossed Sam's mind.

"The Syndicate doesn't deserve to be forgotten either," he said as a way of explanation. "And a full mural felt too invasive. I can order they be painted over, if you don't—"

"No," Technoblade interrupted. "It's perfect, all of this is absolutely perfect."

"You don't have to—"

"It's all *perfect*."

Technoblade smiled once more at Philza's portrait, then walked out from under the arches. The fountain piece's marble flags flared up with the

moon's milky light, turning the water below into a flat sheet of white, a piece of a bright sky captured in the depths. The glow was so strong it felt like they were staring into the sun. The light bounced off the pillars and into the covered halls, illuminating the murals and bringing them to life. Sam could almost hear them animate, and he sat down on the edge of a wall to listen. Technoblade joined him, cocking his ears. He likely sensed something too.

Sam could spend years studying the wonders of the world, both natural and mechanical, and yet he would still never understand how the courtyard was so alive in its still and silent state. Whether it was the art itself or the memories they paired with it, he would never know.

However, there was a warm, fuzzy feeling deep in his gut assuring him he didn't need to comprehend the why, simply the what. What this courtyard was; to him, to his family, to everyone it paid homage to.

Sam knew, and Technoblade apparently did too.

"Daedalus," he whispered, "this may be your finest creation yet."

Chapter Thirty: For The Love Of All

Cabinet meetings were perhaps the only things Puffy didn't like about being a queen.

They were necessary, she knew that, but that didn't mean she had to *like* them more than she had to. She and Sam knew how to take care of the South without a parade of advisors breathing down their necks and scrutinizing their every choice.

That was perhaps a little unfair to them. They were just doing their jobs, after all, and an outside eye was a good thing to have.

It was just tedious, sometimes, to sit there for an hour or even three and hear them debate and report things the monarchs already knew and had solved in their own time. It was nothing like the animated discussions that would take place in the Badlands, where the leaders worked in swift tandem and got things done effective immediately. In fact, she had learned a lot of things in the South were nothing like they were in the Badlands. She just had to adapt, as she always did.

Sometimes, however, the meetings did go by with a breeze. The one today was far more a last minute check and news gazette than reviewing laws and the like. It was a formality more than anything.

"For one, I would like to congratulate Her Majesty on her continued efforts regarding the harbour," one advisor said somewhere near the start of the meeting. "The construction and expansion has managed to air the streets, and more merchants seem to be sailing in by the day."

Continued efforts was perhaps too soft a term for what it all really was. Puffy had never understood Sam's workaholic attitude, until she had found a passion project of her own to bury her head into. The cabinet was happy with what she showed them, but the enormity of what she hid away in the privacy of the royal study would have terrified them more than anything. They had to accommodate a second desk just for the plans, blueprints, maps, notes, journals, books and other piles of knick-knacks she had accumulated throughout her extensive hours working on it.

The amount of care and research put into the project was staggering, but impressive. So impressive it scared all those who knew about it, Sam especially. Sure, when *he* spent months or even years slaving over the same blueprints, he was seen as a hard worker and not a madman—at least not to his face, of course—because that was a normal state for him. Sam seemed to be born to be constantly using that brilliant mind of his.

But Puffy? The free and airy lover of the ocean? The Queen with a right balance of compassion and tough skin? She who preferred the blue sky to the ornate ceiling of an enclosed office space deep in the twisting bowels of the palace?

Sam was actually worried for her, at first, until she assured him everything was fine.

More than fine.

She was making a difference, in more ways than one.

Social aids and charities had been started by her too, as well as food drives and fundraisers to help the struggling in the secluded villages and towns. Most of the palace's own money nowadays was invested into building healing wards and providing education to the less fortunate, and most importantly into preserving peace both inside the kingdom and out.

Everything she had wanted to do back in the SMP was now completely possible with no strings attached. She was a Queen, and just like she had

said one day so long ago now, she vowed to be the best one the South had ever known.

It was ambitious to be sure, but she was on the right track. Everyone knew that, and it was only their respect for the deceased monarchs of the past that prevented them from saying anything aloud.

"I have another plan for an expansion here," Puffy said, rolling another blueprint out on the table. It was signed off by her husband—who definitely knew more about planning out buildings and architectural spaces than she did—but the main stamp over it was hers and hers alone. "We could start thinking about building ships."

"Building?"

"We could start with just minimal repairs, but eventually we could branch out. One day we might even have the technical skills to create a whole navy."

The cabinet mumbled in agreement. Technoblade put on his reading glasses and peered closer at the blueprints. Sam simply smiled and placed a hand on her knee underneath the table, his silent way of showing her he was proud. She did the same whenever she could.

"We can present the idea at the autumn equinox," suggested one of the other advisors, rolling up the plan and tucking it away with other business for safekeeping. "There's a festival in town, and sending a messenger with the good news could be a good way to contact the people—"

"A festival?" Sam perked up.

"Yes, Your Majesty. This is the first year one has been organized by the people for the equinox."

"We're going."

"Among the people? Just like that?"

Puffy almost snorted, slightly miffed the advisors hadn't been paying closer attention to her actions as Queen.

"Of course," she confirmed. "Sounds like fun. In fact, give the staff the day and evening off for it too."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The acceptance was almost given as a half-hearted sigh. A few of their more "progressive" and "hands-on" suggestions often were, by at least two of the older advisors in the cabinet. Of course, they were the ones who had been used to how things used to be done in the times before.

The King and Queen who had sailed in from overseas were just familiar with another way, and fortunately their influence had swayed most of their government. At most, they were questioned a little or made to double check and confirm. Only once or twice were they really pressured to think of another solution—and, well, if Sam had given in, there wouldn't have been an equal leadership between him and his wife, and the redstone academy doors wouldn't even have existed in the first place, let alone be opened.

They always took concerns into account and worked around them, sometimes managing to kill two birds with one stone. In the end, most of their ideas and innovations passed through the cabinet's scrutiny, even past the older eyes reflecting dynasties of old.

The royal couple were good, and more importantly they cared.

That was likely one of the big reasons their advisors, ministers and courtiers loved them as much as they did, and remained loyal.

"Anything else?" asked Sam.

"The annual sculk flower eradication was completed yesterday," said Boomer, "and just in time. Some of the flowers were already starting to bloom."

"Enough to start another virus?"

"A small amount, but luckily they were the ones deep in the mountain caves. There weren't enough to spread too far and make their toxins effective."

"Still, send medical supplies to the nearby towns and villages around that area. We can't take any risks. Apart from that, have there been any new growths spotted?"

"Sculk spores were carried a little to the East, or so our ambassadors and close tradesmen have said."

"We should send a word of warning."

"Already done, Your Majesty. They acted immediately, forgive the absence of an order."

"Great, and beyond the Four realms?"

"It's not improbable to think storms from past years have indeed carried them overseas."

"We need to see which lands across the ocean lie immediately south of our kingdom. How much time do we have before the sculk poses a problem?"

"Only when the flowers start to grow, and it can then take anytime between two years and a whole decade for them to bloom and release their toxins for the first time. They can't be removed properly before that."

"Better send a word of warning now, then."

"And offer to send over a soldier or two to show them how to deal with the issue," Puffy added. "No nation deserves to struggle through a pandemic alone."

"Yes, Your Majesties."

A messenger was sent off immediately after to do just that.

Puffy laid her hands on the table. "Any more sculk news?" she asked.

"No, Your Majesty."

"Good, let's move on." She grabbed one of the papers in front of Sam. "Redstone?"

"Mines or academy?"

"Both."

"The mines are richer with ore the further down we dig, and we've just finished signing off a deal with Cogchamp Academy. You might have seen some of their students roam the halls of our own school. As for our own Academy, we're thriving. The letters sent out to a couple of the Grand Masters have been answered, and two are prepared to take on a teaching job with a one year contract. They should arrive sometime in the next month or so."

"Excellent!" Sam exclaimed. "Make sure we have two guest rooms prepared in the palace for them. We will greet them personally, and I will take a day off to show them around myself."

"And please prepare a garrison to escort the King back home when the day runs up," Puffy also said with a teasing grin, "otherwise, I feel like he'll never emerge from that place again."

The remark was met with a few, polite chuckles, the loudest of which came from Technoblade himself. "I'm on it," he assured her, reaching over and pinning Sam's arm down on the chair's hand rest.

"Anything else?" Puffy resumed, trying not to laugh herself as Sam kicked her under the table and tried to free himself from Technoblade's grasp.

Seepeekay coughed. "There's news from some of the guard posts near the Western border."

Immediately, all their antics died down. The cabinet listened intently.

"Go on," Sam pressed with pursed lips, sinking back down into his chair.

"There have been sightings of Corpse and his rebel group near the Western border," Seepeekay told them.

"Again?"

"Again."

"What did the patrols do?"

"Nothing. They were mainly rumours from the townsfolk, but the descriptions matched up between different sources."

"Over the border?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Has the West given him protection?"

"We've thought of that, so we sent our ambassador a letter to ask. He says he hasn't seen Corpse in the Western court, but then again who knows what goes on behind closed doors. The foreign ambassadors are often kept out of the loop, especially when times are troubled."

It was no secret to anyone that the Western crown was changing heads yet again.

"So we don't know if a new alliance with the West has put him up to this?"

"I'm afraid not."

"There's no need to needlessly confront them," Puffy pointed out. "We have no concrete proof Corpse has linked himself to them in any way, and if we're wrong a single attack could mean all-out war. We can't risk that if we're building a defense based solely on suspicion and nothing else."

Sam nodded along. "Corpse's grievances with us are his own, and the order to leave the South was given to him and his acolytes. As far as this goes, this dispute is one that remains the South's own personal business until further notice."

"What do you suggest we do, then?"

"Send word for a patrol to be dispatched to the border tomorrow," Sam decided. "The Queen and I will go with them." With no more outstanding business on the table, the King and Queen stood up. The rest of the cabinet followed. "Meeting adjourned."

It didn't end on the highest of notes.

Puffy was meant to join Sam and Techno on the military training grounds for a light-hearted sparring session, but she declined last minute. Her stomach went queasy at the prospect of having to pick up her cutlass with thoughts of Corpse still tormenting her mind. After two years, the worry of his presence didn't fade, and neither did the wisps of his shadow around the edges of her mind. When it wasn't his tail whipping in and out of the corner of her eyes, it was his amber stare burning in the background of her nightmares.

In times like these, there was only one thing that could truly numb her enough to forget them.

The palace had a bathhouse, Puffy had discovered rather early on in her stay there. The water inside had dried up a long time ago except for the damp humidity of its abandonment, and the room itself seemed to have been unknown to most of the nobles too. The Queen had it done up soon after her coronation. With a low ceiling, scenes of ocean mythology painted on the wall and a new running filter and fountain tucked into a niche at the back—and still unknown to most at court, this time purposely so—it was the perfect place to escape when everything became too much to bear, or she needed a small break.

Also, cats hated water. It was the only way she was going to get Corpse out of her head.

Sometimes, the fountain was running fast enough to create a current. The surface would wave, and Puffy could feel like she was drifting in a shallow bay or a large lagoon instead of an enclosed marble pool. She could dive beneath the surface and touch the mosaic floor with the tips of her fingers, watching them glitter and glow with the shine of a million pearls, shells and sea treasures that had once been a hard-earned struggle to get rather than literally handed to her on a plate.

For someone once shunned as a pirate in the court, her courtiers now seemed awfully keen to hand her riches they once claimed she stole. It was flattery, and bribery at its core. A diamond necklace often had a favour casually snuck in soon after, somewhere down the line.

She had earned their respect and loyalty, not the unbridled right to gold and jewels. She had never invited them in in the first place. They were illusions, they were not the solutions many claimed they were.

The only ones she could fully accept were the ones she worked for or acquired herself, fairly and earnestly, or the ones that held her heart dearly. Her wedding ring, for instance, or the pearl necklace her daughter had made for her some months ago for her birthday. The rest, whatever she could, she gave away to those that needed it the most.

Puffy rose back up for air. Darkness bled through the windows, and the flames danced in the hanging copper dishes on stands by the door.

It was warm and cozy, but it was all artificial. She still remembered the evenings she'd slip down off her ship and swim in the ocean for an hour or two, calm and fearless, while the stars' lights drifted alongside her as bioluminescent algae and silver sea foam.

She sometimes missed those days.

"It's getting late, we should find her."

"In this maze of a palace? Great idea, Daedalus."

"It's not that big, and anyway, I think I have an idea of where to look..."

The door to the bathhouse creaked open. As flighty as a fish, Puffy dashed behind the centerpiece, an alabaster and malachite statue. She peered out of the gap between the handle of Poseidon's trident and his calf.

"I'll go check the drawing rooms just in case."

Technoblade's shadow ambled away, leaving Sam's alone in the rectangle of chandelier light bleeding through from the threshold.

He walked forwards and called out, "Puffy, are you here?"

She slipped beneath the surface and ducked out from behind the statue. Sticking to the edges of the pool, she stealthily swam closer.

Sam still hadn't noticed her, instead craning his neck to peer behind the statue of Poseidon and into the shadows towards the back wall.

"Puffy?"

His shadow moved closer to the edge and grew as he crouched down, and Puffy saw her chance. With the swiftness and grace of a dolphin, she leapt out just long enough to wrap her hands around his waist and pull him down.

The cry of shock he let out lasted barely a second. They were both engulfed beneath the foaming ripples.

Both of them were floating. Too light to sink to the mosaic covered bottom and too heavy to float up back towards the surface without writhing and kicking, without disturbing the perfect suspension.

Hours of swimming had softened the water to Puffy's senses. It glided over her without leaving so much as a fleeting blemish on her skin behind.

For Sam, however, she knew it must have been a hash bite. She could feel him freeze up in her arms, the same tension that would rack his body when the winter chill would start to settle in when he least expected it, or when a snowball gone awry would run down his collar or over bare skin.

They locked eyes.

Sam mouthed his shock. His voice fell silently on her waterlogged senses, his words turning into bubbles and rising towards the surface. Puffy leaned in and kissed him deeply.

She felt her breath run out, and paid no attention to it. She had given every ounce of it to him anyway. One more kiss was hardly a crime.

Sam rocketed up for air, and she followed soon afterwards. Bursting above the water's surface, he gasped loudly and groped blindly for the edge.

He looked exactly as when she had first laid eyes on him. When he had saved her from the ocean, when her back first touched the SMP's shores. She

had managed to open her eyes just enough to see her saviour, staring down at with a soaking wet face. Not too flattering. She would have never imagined she'd end up marrying him one day. He had been the last person she had seen in her first life. He was the one she wanted to see at the end of her last, too.

Sam spat out a mouthful of water and glared at her. "Very funny," he tutted.

It was actually, to see him endearingly grumpy, like a big wet dog. She couldn't stop herself from bursting into a fit of laughter.

"I think I married a mersheep by accident."

"A mersheep? Is that the best you can come up with?"

"When I've got an entire pond in my brain and a pretty water spirit laughing in my face, yes."

He raised his arms over his head and pulled off his shirt. The wet fabric clung stubbornly to his chest, leaving behind glistening trails and slapping the tiled floor beside them with a sopping splat.

He noticed she was watching him with hungry eyes and rolled his own. "I feel like you pulled me in on purpose."

"Oh, I would *never* do that for my own gain."

She pushed herself away from the wall and towards him. Her slippery hands caught him around his waist and held on, even as she drifted behind his back. Once there, she traced the blemishes and scars she found.

She knew which ones were from where and when. She knew which ones had been merely flesh wounds, and which ones had almost killed him. She knew every one of their stories. She had mapped him out completely.

Her hands drifted around his stomach, brushing over the rough, horizontal line of three patches of raised scar tissue. An Orion's starry belt of his own. She rested her fingers there and pressed her lips to his spine.

"No matter what stunt you pull, you just keep winning, don't you?" Sam complained.

"You noticed?"

He put his hands over hers. "It's part of your charm. Still, you're lucky I love you as much as I do. Technoblade won't let you get away with attempting to drown him."

"I didn't marry Techno though, did I?"

Sam turned around. "So marrying me was just a way to get some murder benefits. Got it."

"Of course it wasn't. There are other advantages too."

"I can imagine."

Puffy knew where this was going. It was where most of their teasing conversations like this tended to go, especially when he held her like he did, or how he gathered and bunched her wet hair over one of her shoulders, or with the way he ran his hand over her back, or how he left a long, deep mark of his adoration on her cheek...

"You could have just told me you found her." In the corner of her eye, she watched a furry pink silhouette grow closer.

"And miss this moment of bliss?" Sam kissed her cheek again. "Unlikely."

Techno nudged the wet remains of the shirt, still miserably cast aside. "You were really just looking for any excuse to show yourself off after our spar."

"*Someone* has to appreciate our hard work."

"I'm sure they can without you having to strip."

"Techno's got a point," Puffy agreed, biting her tongue lest she laugh.

He tickled her sides until she couldn't hold it in any longer. "I'd have gone around it a lot more tactfully if someone hadn't decided to try and drag me to a watery grave."

"Speaking of dragging you places," Techno continued, cutting in. "We've got somewhere to be, remember?"

"Right!" Sam climbed out of the pool and held his hand out to Puffy. "Darling?"

She took it and stepped out after him, shivering in her wet linen as the cold world out of the water finally hit her in full force. Sam wrapped her in a towel and tucked her protectively under his arm.

Technoblade, far less elegant and heartwarming, threw another towel straight at Sam's face, along with a spare uniform jacket borrowed from one of the guards on duty outside the door.

"A little bit of decency wouldn't go amiss."

He then led them both out of the bathhouse like a piglin on a mission, and judging from the conspiratorial secrecy between him and her husband, he definitely was.

"What's this all about?" Puffy asked Sam in a whisper.

Annoyingly, all he did was wink. "You'll see."

Fortunately, she didn't have to wait long.

She heard the surprise before she saw it. She heard laughter and loud voices. There were no lights in any of the rooms up ahead, as would have been expected if there were a rowdy celebration afoot, the only reason there should have been loud noise at this time of night.

Next, she saw the orange light flickering on the frame of an open, full-length window. The merriment grew louder, and Technoblade beckoned them through the threshold.

Sam stopped her a little way behind. "I know you don't like big gestures," he began, which already spilled all the guilt out.

"Sam," she sighed, "what have you done?"

"It was Techno's idea too, and Boomer's and... well... What I'm trying to say is that it's a joint effort from all of us." He took her hands and led her to the window, smiling sheepishly. "We've all been working hard for the past few months, you especially. You've done more than I have, for both the royal court and the people. The harbour's expansion is credited to you and you alone. The economic modifications to ease poverty are too. Lots of the biggest positive changes are thanks to you, and you deserve something in return."

The Queen thought her family, friends and people's love was payment enough. The King didn't seem to think so, but then again he wouldn't.

He had always been that way, thinking that any love he gave was never enough for anyone, and especially not himself. That nothing he did was ever enough, and everyone could do it better. It was very nearly a destructive

tendancy, hence the rule of "no big gestures" having to be firmly put in place.

It was, however, still sweet for him to go to the trouble of doing something. She couldn't fault him for wanting to.

Turns out, it was all so much simpler than she had expected—or she was used to anymore.

Out on the balconied terrace overlooking the gardens drowned in moonless obscurity, a small gathering lounged around a blazing firepit, restless and waiting. As the King and Queen joined them they all stood up, but they didn't bow or curtsy. There was no need, not for close friends.

"Glad you finally made it," Tina smiled, going over to fluff up the thick cushions on the opposite side of the fire, inviting them to sit.

Puffy glanced at Sam.

He smiled back, "Surprise."

It was indeed.

They sat, and shuffled closer to the flames. Her hair was still wet, and it had always been a pain to dry. Puffy sneezed and immediately sunk deeper into the velvet cushions, unconsciously searching for more warmth.

Well, Techno was right there.

"May I?"

"Do I have a choice?" he grunted back, already outstretching his arm as an invitation.

"Nope."

And she snuggled up closer, burying her face in his thick fur. His hand came to rest on her shoulder. Meanwhile, Michelle rushed to sit with her father, leaping into his chest with the force of a cannonball. He ruffled the top of her head and tickled her senseless until they were both laughing their heads off.

Boomer passed food and drinks around, then raised his glass. "A toast?" he suggested.

Sam nodded and took the lead. "Here's to Puffy, our hardworking queen and my brilliant wife."

"To the Queen!" chanted everyone else, not only as loyal subjects but as good friends.

Puffy raised her own cup. "You all work just as hard, and Sam and I are lucky to have friends such as you. You deserve every bit of my own gratitude."

Techno squeezed her shoulder, raising his cup higher. "To everyone," he agreed. "To all the people present here that don't make me want to tear this kingdom down to its bare foundations."

No one could really tell if it was a joke or not, as the slight but nervous laughs that followed indicated.

Technoblade was their Falstaff, the contrast between the courtiers' luxury and the common crowd.

He only dressed finely for occasions, kept a rough and familiar dialect that used to scandalise the court until they got used to it and realized their monarchs did the same, and wasn't afraid to speak his mind whenever and wherever he pleased. However, no one spoke ill of him. Not because if they did he'd tear them apart—although he could—not because he was close enough to the King and Queen he could make them pay politically—although he could do that too—but because there was no reason to. Technoblade had been honest about who he was right from day one and hadn't lied to anyone since, and after a month of living amongst them all had found his place as a friend, confident, advisor and respected warrior. He was happy.

It was a surprise how the royal court had warmed up to the anarchist faster than they once had to their future Queen. However, she would have never been jealous of him. The easier his assimilation, the happier everyone was. It was hard to start a new life in a new place, and the contempt she had endured was a torture she wouldn't have wanted anyone to have to bear.

Puffy drank to that more than she did to anything else.

"So," Seepeekay began, "what's the plan for tomorrow?"

Sam let out a muffled sigh of acknowledgement and put down his glass. "Right, we set off at six to reach the border at around ten. Make sure the patrol is ready beforehand and await our orders, then—"

"Oh no you don't." Puffy chided him, kicking his shin. "No work tonight."

"But—"

"We had an entire three hour meeting to discuss the technicalities," she rightfully pointed out.

Sam opened his mouth to argue, but Puffy quickly cut him off with a look. He sighed and folded without much of a struggle, and turned back to Seepeekay.

"We set off at six," he said as a point of finality on their work conversation, and that was that.

With work out of the way, the small gathering finally started to feel like a relaxing celebration rather than yet another government meeting.

"Pa?" Michelle asked, pressing her forehead against her father's.

"Yes, princess?"

"Could I fight you?"

Puffy spat out her drink, as did Techno. The rest of their friends stopped what they were doing, food hovering in mid-air and conversation shut down. Only Seepeekay seemed to not be fazed. He hummed and continued to eat, casting occasional glances towards the scene.

"Fight me?" Sam spluttered.

"Yeah, with weapons."

He laughed. "Are you challenging me to a duel?"

Her voice was anything but teasing. "Yep."

"She's capable enough," Seepeekay offered from the opposite side of the fire pit. "She's made incredible progress."

"Seepeekay, I'm not going to fight my own daughter."

"Why not?" Michelle pouted.

"It's a matter of principle."

"I don't care, fight me."

"I'm not—"

"For gods' sake, Sam," Technoblade sighed. "We *know* you don't want to hurt her! And you won't!"

"But what if I do?"

Michelle left a kiss on his forehead. "Then I forgive you. Come on!"

She took out a sword hidden behind one of the cushions, one that Puffy hadn't even noticed either. She wondered what other surprises were in store.

Seepeekay tossed his own blade to the King. "Good luck," he smirked, winking.

The confusion painting itself on Sam's face was hilarious to see. Puffy only stifled her laugh by burying it in her glass.

Michelle waited near the edge of the balcony. "Come on," she whined, "you're too slow."

Her father came over and took up a stance in front of her. "I'll go easy," he promised.

Michelle shrugged. "Suit yourself."

They saluted one another, and their blades locked. Tina gave the starting ding with a glass and a knife.

Immediately, they all knew they were in for a treat.

Michelle took the first move and swung her blade at her opponent. Sam parried, but grunted against the pressure. A soft "what the heck" escaped him as he found himself struggling. He looked at Puffy and Techno, a need for help burning brightly in his eyes. They only gazed back with wide smiles and teasing toasts of good luck.

When he was distracted, Michelle slipped her blade from his and snuck underneath his arm. Sam tripped forwards, destabilised, and she hit him from behind. He fell to the floor and rolled over just in time to stop her next swing, pushing her away.

For a moment it seemed like he'd get an upper hand. Sam managed to scramble back to his feet and force his daughter backwards until she was pressed against the banister. That should have been enough to trap her and have her admit her defeat, but the little piglin wasn't done yet.

She slipped out of his way and somehow managed to knock him down again. This time, once he fell, she wasted no time in training the point of her sword on his neck.

Their audience erupted into cheer, the loudest of which came from Seepeekay. He howled at the moon like a distant wolf cousin, and Michelle's eye lit up.

"Did I do everything right?" she asked excitedly, rushing towards him.

The fox hugged her tightly. "Everything and more," he exclaimed before picking her up in triumph.

Tina went over to Sam. "You good?"

He groaned and made no effort to move. "I was going easy," he said, but Puffy knew better.

So did Tina, apparently. "Of course you did."

She helped him up, and he brushed himself down. Puffy winced when she saw him nurse a bruise on his wrist, kissing it better once he rejoined her side.

"Did I hurt him?" Michelle suddenly asked, worried. She watched her father sink into the cushions and flush red.

Sam smiled and shook his head. "You hurt my ego," he told her, earning laughs from everyone around him. "But otherwise, I'm fine. Well done, princess. You're an incredible warrior."

The praise made her glow, and she escaped Seepeekay's arms to leap into Sam's. He hugged her back tightly, and Puffy leaned a hand over to stroke her fur.

"I'm so proud of you," Sam whispered, placing a kiss on her cheek. "So proud. My daughter is incredible and so much more talented and skilled than I was at her age. The kingdom couldn't have asked for a better princess."

When the last sentence left his lips, Puffy felt the air shift. Over Sam's shoulder, Michelle glanced at her mother, then at Seepeekay. The fox bit his lip but said nothing. He gave her a flick of his tail only the piglin seemed to understand.

Puffy watched them converse silently, trying to read between their eyes and through their sudden changes of attitude. Sam, if he had noticed how his

daughter and tensed up, didn't say anything about it. He just kept his arms tightly around her, and nothing else seemed to matter except the two of them.

Michelle had to practically pry herself away, and sat down next to him.

Technoblade's laugh shook the flames and the food. "Well, if Michelle can take down Sam without much trouble, I should be worried," he said, and the cheerful ambiance from before returned.

Michelle's sparks returned. "Can I fight you?"

"Not tonight," her uncle pressed to refuse, then rubbed his shoulder sheepishly. "Your father already almost dislocated my arm today, and I'd rather not take any risks..."

"You punched me in the gut and I still stepped up to the challenge," Sam protested, holding his head high with what Puffy could only describe as a last ditch effort to save his pride.

"Now, now, boys," she tutted playfully.

"Techno's not hurt," Tina scoffed, "he's just *scared*."

"Scared ?" Techno scoffed. "Me? Scared? Of what, my own niece?"

"It makes sense," Boomer added. "Why else would the fabled orphan slayer be scared of fighting a child?"

"Never has there ever been a tale of the Blade where he was scared of anything."

"There's always a first."

"I just don't want to be murdered by her parents if I hurt her," Techno tried to argue.

Puffy gave him a hard look. "And yet you have no qualms in taking us on directly. I sense some hypocrisy here."

"I'm so cool even Uncle Techno is too much of a chicken to fight me!" Michelle puffed her chest up proudly.

"I am a piglin, thank you very much," her uncle grunted. "And I'm not scared."

"Whatever you say, you coward," teased Seepeekay.

In retaliation, Technoblade lobbed a handful of marshmallows at him. One or two hit their mark, and the rest fell into the fire. They were cooked to a crisp in a matter of moments, the sharp smell of burning sugar filling the rising fumes.

As Technoblade armed himself with a toasting fork and went to confront the fox, Puffy leaned back and stared up at the sky.

The stars smiled down on their little gathering, and although the moon was absent she could feel its own milky white love just as strongly. She felt herself drift off, sailing peaceful far far into the unknown, into the tranquil oblivion that would soon swallow up this night.

The King, Queen and their court would be remembered for what they did for the South, not for the little moments of friendship and bliss like they did here. She had accepted that long ago.

Legacy didn't care about what was ephemeral, they cared about what was concrete. It was both a blessing and a curse. On one hand that would make all the precious moments between them meaningless in the grand carousel of Time, an amusement riding up and down for a few trips then disappearing when all those who remembered them were gone. On the other, that made it all theirs, and theirs alone. They didn't have to share with History's often twisted narrative. They could make these memories their own, no strings attached.

The dilemma was unironically what made it all that much beautiful.

Puffy didn't know when or where the night sky was traded for a painted one, or the wild crackling bonfire for a tame hearth in an ornamental fireplace. As far as she was concerned, she hadn't moved. She was still warm and cosy on a bed of velvet cushions, greedily lapping up the luxury she found herself in. It was worth leaning into sometimes.

Someone combed through her curls, and she closed her eyes. Puffy could very well do it on her own—she had done so since she was a lamb—but she had to admit being pampered from time to time was a guilty pleasure of hers. There was something so cozy about lounging in front of a mirror or the warm fire in their bedchamber, watching and feeling a brush and Sam's gentle fingers caressing through her hair. Oftentimes, they'd talk about everything and nothing. In other moments, they'd sit in an intimate silence, simply content with being with one another.

Whatever the intimate evenings became, they all brought along the same thing. Bliss, pure and utter bliss. A content purr rose in her chest, and she shuffled closer.

Lips landed on her collarbone. "You still awake?" a soft voice asked her. The brush slowed down.

She hummed and nodded, opening an eye. An arm settled around her waist and she tucked it closer until his forearm dug into her ribs, securing her close and warm. She clung onto it like a lifebelt.

He brushed a handful of hair, then moved it out of her face. "There's my darling," he cooed, nuzzling her softly.

"Thank you," she said, "for tonight. It was nice."

"I thought you'd like it in the end." Sam put down the brush, the one strong arm around her turning to two. "I sometimes just wish I could do more. You deserve the world."

He was her world, him and their daughter. How could an entire existence be fit into two figures considered so insignificant by the rest of the Universe? She would never know, and she wouldn't try to understand. It simply was, and she wouldn't wish for any other.

Their love was their magic, their little snow globe of happiness in a tumultuous world so hell-bent on sucking away every last drop of joy until their will ran dry. They were each other's everything.

"You've already given it to me ten times over."

His grip tightened, as seemingly did this throat. "I always will, no matter when or where we end up."

"That's one heck of a promise," she remarked.

"You know I have a flair for surpassing expectations," he reminded her. "Everyone knows that, even the gods themselves."

"Oh yeah?" Puffy managed to free herself from his arms and sit up, turning properly towards him. "Even the heavens?"

"Even the heavens."

"And if you had one thing to say to them about all this, what would it be?"

"We'll find each other in every universe."

It sounded like a vow. It was a vow; engraved deep within their souls, ringing in every gods' ears, set in stone between the lines and lines of writing Fate had used to fashion their past, present and future together and apart.

Every universe, no matter what.

"It's a date," Puffy decided.

"We haven't had one of those in a while," Sam replied.

"Well, let's just keep that one on the schedule until further notice. Don't be late."

"Late to love you? I would never dare."

He had always been right on time, for everything, some less fortunate than others. He could be in the wrong or right place, but he'd always be there at the right time, which was whenever Fate dictated him to be. Punctual to a fault, even on the path of his own destiny.

Sam seemed to be someone's favourite toy—someone with divine power and influence—to play with whenever they pleased. Everything about him from his mind to his actions seemed calculated by something, an otherworldly force when it was not by his own volition.

Puffy still wondered if they were planned or not. Were their two hearts meant to cross and bond as tightly as they did, tied to each other to the point of suffocation? Was it an accident in the grander scheme of things?

Or was it simply the realization of a long overdue promise from another time, another place, another world entirely. Perhaps the Sam of those other realities had promised the same thing as he did to her now, and their romance was simply a product of their own repeated cycle of vows made over existences and existences.

Maybe, as ridiculous as the term sounded now after its infamous corruption, it was meant to be.

They were meant to be, and Puffy had the singing soul, racing heart and wedding ring to prove it.

She let Sam cup her cheek and press closer to her, pecks of gunpowder heavily lingering in his wake. His chest rumbled and crackled beneath her fingertips, a whole storm of wild affection caught in a bottle and simply

bursting to be unleashed. The only outlets he allowed himself to release the building smoke were chaste kisses and innocent caresses pressed to her face and shoulders.

She felt loved, just simply and absolutely *loved*.

Tilting her head down, caught sight of the black and blue blemish on the side of his left-hand joint. It looked slightly more swollen than she had last seen it.

"How's your wrist?"

"Surprisingly painful," he laughed, rolling up his jacket sleeve. "Michelle's a feisty one, I'll give you that. She gets it from you."

"I don't know if I should take that as an insult or a compliment."

"A compliment, of course. You know I spoil you, my darling."

"Don't flatter yourself," she clapped back with a tease.

Nevertheless, she took her hand in his and kissed the bruise again. She looked up for his reaction. Sam winced, but stared at her with starry eyes.

She kissed it again. This time, he shivered.

She moved higher, rolling up his sleeve further. He didn't try to stop her, although his cheeks began to burn with rose-coloured hues.

He didn't protest when she pushed the uniform jacket off his shoulders either and trailed her embraces higher.

Finally, she reached his lips. He gave in sweetly and gently, tilting her head up with a finger or two.

"Feel better?" she mumbled.

"Much..."

The kisses deepened, as did her hands on his chest. Puffy pushed him down on his back, nails digging into his skin. Sam let her do so, but not without a little rumbling chuckle.

"What happened to letting it flow, huh?"

"What do you mean? I'm just following the current."

The time, the comfy place, the warmth and the ridges of his scars and muscles that she traced absent-mindedly—the current, indeed. She had always been a good navigator.

"Mind me taking the helm tonight?" she checked in a murmur.

He leaned into her touches, completely willing. "Not at all. Techno said you could take me down with a kiss. I'd like to see if that's true."

She was only too happy to oblige.

"You've been hanging around Tubbo a lot less."

Aimsey glanced up. Niki stood in front of her, cloth in hand.

The bunny's ears twitched. "You've noticed?"

"Everyone's noticed." She wiped the table, picking up Aimsey's plate and drink to clean underneath before setting them down again. "Now things are more peaceful around here, we have the time to pay attention to a lot of things."

Aimsey sighed. "I don't mean to be distant with him," she said.

Niki shrugged. "Sometimes, it's just good to have some quality time alone."

"No, it's not that." Aimsey fumbled with her drink. "It's something complicated."

"Complicated?"

"Complicated."

"Well, this *is* Tubbo we're talking about." She laughed. "Tubbo has always been a complicated sort of guy."

"He has?"

"Yes! I fought with him back in L'Manberg. He was complicated then, and he hasn't really changed since."

"In what way?"

"Well, one moment he'd be fascinated by new hives or going off to pick flowers for Wilbur, and the next he would be gunning down some ten men with maniacal laughter. It was interesting to say the least, not to mention he's a redstone lover. Now if being friends with Sam has taught me anything, it's that redstone engineers are as peculiar and as complicated as the things they build."

Aimsey laughed, but the dark thoughts still tormented her. "It's not to do with any of that," she said. "He's not like that with me. It's something else."

"Something else?"

"I think it might be more... personal."

Niki's eyes widened in what Aimsey took as complete understanding. She was proven wrong as soon as Niki sat down next to her, took her hand and said: "Are you in love with him?"

Aimsey choked in disbelief. "What? No, absolutely not!"

"Just asking."

"No, we're only friends. It's just... something he asked me."

"He asked you to do something?"

"No, it was something that he could do for me, and I don't know if I should take him up on it."

Niki hummed. "Why not, is it serious?"

Seriously insane, yes.

Aimsey nodded.

"How serious, on a scale of one to ten."

"Fifteen."

There was a pause.

"Okay, then. Can you tell me what it is?"

The bunny shook her head. Niki shifted in her seat and Aimsey averted her eyes.

The bakery was dark, darker than it usually seemed. It was poorly lit with only the single lamp over her own occupied table still on, and the faint glow flickering from the threshold behind the counter. Outside, the Prime Path was silent. There only seemed to be the two of them in the world, but Aimsey knew better.

Sometimes, she could almost hear Eryn's cries from deep inside the Vault. Even now.

"I can't," she replied. "All I can say is that if he goes through with it, he's going to ruin his own life. It requires breaking someone's trust and... I can't let him do that."

"Would they know if he did?"

"Does it matter? He'd do it. He's going to ruin his own life to save another, and he wants me to choose. I can't, because it means I have to choose between two friends. If everything stays as it is, one life will be ruined. If Tubbo goes through with his plan, his own will go up in flames. And he's asking me to make that choice! I can't do that, I just can't—!"

A hand landed on her shoulder. "Breathe."

Aimsey did. It was hard, but she did it. Her throat shook, her lungs ached and her head spun. She pushed her food away, no longer hungry. The simple thought of drinking made her want to throw up.

Through it all, Niki's eyes were sad. She looked like she dared not even try to pull away, as if she was the glue keeping the last frail strands of the bunny hybrid together. If she pulled away, everything would come crashing down.

Aimsey swallowed hard. "What if your best friend was—" *A convicted criminal*. "—seen as insane by everyone? How would you feel?"

A strange expression painted Niki's face. She relaxed her grip. "I know *exactly* how it would feel, because I went through that."

Aimsey's ears pricked up. "Really?"

"You've heard of Wilbur Soot, right?"

A chill ran up her spine. She nodded.

"He was my best friend and when I first came to the SMP, he was all I had. Even when he went off the rails, even when he blew up L'Manberg, he was still my best friend. I loved him, and I still do. That was why I killed him."

Aimsey jumped. "You killed him?"

"Shot an arrow right through his chest." She traced the exact spot on her own. "I loved him, but he was past all hope, and it was dangerously affecting others. There was nothing else to be done."

"I don't want to kill him, though."

"Who is it?"

"You don't know him," she rushed to reply.

Everyone had seen how Niki had mourned Sapnap, how deep their binding roots ran. They had been mortal enemies once upon a time and, realistically, only a miracle could have pushed them to make up. Their friendship wasn't superficial, easy to brush aside or be dismissed as a reluctant allegiance for a common goal. It was more, so much more. Niki was ready to kill for it, and everyone knew that.

Aimsey stayed silent.

"All I can really say, then," Niki said, getting the message about the food and cleaning it up, "is that there will always be hard choices to make, no matter where you go or what happens. You can weigh the pros and cons, but ultimately you need to follow your gut and do what you think is right."

That was what Aimsey was afraid she'd say. Maybe it was easier for Niki to make that choice, but it wasn't for Aimsey.

The two people who had been the kindest to her in the world were both on the brink of ruining their lives. Aimsey was asked to pull the trigger: either she'd leave Eryn to rot, or she'd have Tubbo tear apart his whole existence for her. It was her choice who to ruin completely.

She didn't want it. Every way she turned, betrayal stared back at her. She couldn't escape its piercing gaze. It wouldn't let her go without a moral fight.

Make a choice, it chanted. *Make a choice, make a choice...*

She prayed it was all a bad dream, that she'd wake up and everything would go back to normal. She prayed the last two and a half years had never happened. That she'd wake up in a makeshift camp in a forest far, far away from the SMP, and that Eryn would be outside cooking them some breakfast with a smile on his face.

She *begged* it was all a bad dream, but it wasn't to be.

Reality burned, dark and cold to the touch. She had a decision to make, and nothing would let her escape it. Procrastination could only put it off for so long.

Time was running out.

Chapter Thirty-One: Morning Bells

Morning was the most invasive time of day. It cut through velvet nights, spilling pastel stuffing into the sky and burned away the stars with blinding rays of gold. It chased away the nocturnal fauna, extinguished fires, dispersed fireside celebration and broke apart lovers. It could also be the most beautiful. There was a good reason so many woke up at ungodly hours to witness the sun rise.

Puffy was one of them, although not willingly. A light break in her heavy sleep where her aching body complained and screamed retribution had her slipping from the warmth of her sleeping place and drifting to the window. They hadn't bothered to close the curtains the night before and she narrowed her eyes against the golden streams falling through the glass panes and onto her curls and bare skin.

She had watched the sunrise without much thought, and barely realized the world had woken up soon after until she heard horses whinny and clatter their hooves against the cobbles.

The palace clock struck six. The bells tolled.

Down in the courtyard, the patrol was already saddling up.

Puffy made her way back over to the bed of cushions and blankets in front of the now cold fireplace. She flopped back down.

"It's morning," she said.

"Already?" Sam groaned and stretched an arm behind his head. "Let's just pretend we're dead."

"I'd love to see you get us out of that one." She clambered on top of him. "Come on, stop being such a big baby about it."

He groaned again, louder and in protest.

She shook him. "Sam," she whined, dragging out his name just as he dragged out his movements.

He opened a single eye. "No."

"One of us has to go."

"And why can't it be you?"

"I'm tired and I'm aching, and you know full well why, love."

"So does half the palace, I bet," he teased back, his reluctance folding in favour of a proud, satisfied smile. "Let me remind you that *you* wanted to take the lead."

She rolled her eyes. "You didn't exactly try to stop me."

"And forfeit last night? I wouldn't have dared."

As she leaned over him, he cupped one of her cheeks. She turned and kissed his palm, making him smile.

"Gods, you are wonderful," he sighed dreamily. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

Puffy dragged her hands over his chest and batted her eyelashes at him. "You're just a lucky, lucky guy. I'm your gift from the gods."

"The gods, huh?"

She was suddenly flipped over, her back crashing back down on the cushions. Sam loomed over her with a sly grin.

"That's such a bold statement coming from such a pretty mouth..."

She erupted into a fit of breathless giggles as he swooped in and began peppering her skin with rough, playful kisses that tickled her senseless.

"I can believe it," Sam purred, satisfied. "You're absolutely divine, and I'm the lucky fool who got to taste heaven..."

"Sammy—Wait—"

He continued to kiss and cuddle her, and she continued to squirm and laugh. At one point, he started to slow down, taking his sweet, sweet time to savour the moment. Instead of trying to push him away, she pulled him closer,

threading her fingers in his hair. The hysterical laughter was replaced by a soft, blissed out sigh as he started pressing his lips to the deep scar over her jaw. Her eyes turned up to the ceiling.

Painted, speckled stars and golden comets gazed back down. Warmth flowed through her with every breath and embraced that graced her skin. The tips of his fingers and his palms were rough, but they were lovely against her.

She was swimming in the heavens.

"Not too sore, I hope," Sam whispered beside her ear. Even while losing himself to her, he was so soft and considerate.

"Not at all."

She felt like she was in paradise.

"But still sore enough to push responsibilities onto me," he pointed out, amused. "You need to make up your mind."

"The patrol was your idea."

"And you agreed to it."

"Not officially. You just threw my name out there."

"Of course I did, we're a team." He held her hand. "Thunder and lightning, remember?"

"That still counts for something?"

"Of course it does. Why wouldn't it?"

"I thought I was Her Royal Majesty Queen Puffy of the Southern Lands."

"You're a lot of things, my darling."

"Like what?"

"Nosy, for one."

She hit him. "Charming."

"Am I wrong?"

"What else?"

"Case and point. You are also temperamental, sometimes, and impulsive—"

"You're one to talk."

"—but you're also a fierce and bold captain, a kind and generous monarch and my witty, beautiful wife. You're strong and brilliant and—"

"Stop it," she giggled, turning her face into her shoulder. She could feel her cheeks heat up.

Sam brushed her hair out of her face and stroked a finger underneath her chin. "I could go on, and on, and on. Every word is true."

All she could do was laugh and try to hide again. He didn't let her and nudged her head out from her shoulder with a kiss.

"Come on, darling," he tutted, "is it so hard to believe you're the most wonderful person I've ever met in my lives?"

"Is it so hard to get you to stop?" she murmured back, still beet red.

"Why would I? I love you, and you deserve to know why. You deserve to be shown and told how much you are adored, by everyone."

"The people show me that every day."

"I bet no one can ever show it like I do..."

His hand stroked teasingly slow down her side, drilling his point in further. His fingers softly squeezed at the softness in her hip.

She just felt so loved, perhaps even too much. This was one of the first times she felt overwhelmed, and over what? A few sweet words and compliments she had heard a hundred times before?

Sam had whispered far more blush-worthy things to her on many occasions, including that past night—*especially* that past night—and yet it was the sweetness that got her all giggly and embarrassed. It was the homely, gentle afterglow of passion, tickling them like candy floss clouds and turning the strong, powerful Queen back into an airy-head teenager. It was insane. It was beautiful.

Puffy wished they had time to bask in it, not just now, but in the past and in the future too. They had both had a brief but sweet taste of true relaxation and peace the day after their wedding, but since then, it was rare.

But maybe...

Maybe there was a way around that.

"Tell you what, if you let me stay here, I'll plan a real honeymoon," she decided. "We never got one, and it seems only fair that we take a decent break, right?"

"You know what, that actually sounds like a good idea," he admitted, considering her offer. "A day or two away wouldn't go amiss."

"Or even longer," she suggested while the thought filled her mind. "We could always chart a course from here back to the SMP, and disguise it as a diplomatic trip."

The way his face brightened was unlike anything she had ever seen before. "Really? You think we can get away with that?"

"It's not a crime. We do run this place, after all."

"No, you're right. We could also take this as an opportunity to entertain foreign relations but—oh my gods, imagine the looks on their faces!"

Whose faces—the scandalized court and advisors or their shocked friends in the SMP—wasn't clear.

"Is that a yes, then?"

"Absolutely, definitely!" He kissed her hard. "This is going to be incredible! I love you!"

"Glad to hear it," she laughed. "So?"

"So, what?"

"We have a compromise, but do we have a deal?"

He sighed. "You can stay here."

Sweet victory.

She sank further into the pillows, now knowing she had no reason to get up anymore. Sam did, but he still lay next to her for a while more, unmoving, draping his arm over her like a blanket and burying his face and his love in the crook of her neck. She rolled over and pressed her back against his chest.

Puffy wished with all her might that they'd both fall asleep again, snug and warm and adoring. They'd find each other in every Universe, and they'd probably be working tirelessly in those ones too. For now, for once, she wanted this one to be about them and only them, as they were now, for days, weeks, months even.

Someone rapped their fist against the bedroom door.

"Hey you two, we're almost ready."

Sam's content purring against her back turned into a large sigh and a grumble thick with a choice of colourful curses.

"You got yourself into this," Puffy reminded him.

"And I'm regretting it." Still, he pushed himself up. Cold air hit her back and she shivered. "Are you sure you're staying here?"

"Mhm."

"Even if we give you the comfiest saddle in existence?"

The thought of doing anything but lying down and sleeping the day away made her groan. "Even then."

"Ah, I see."

"What?"

"You prefer riding me to a horse."

Puffy choked on air and flushed a deep, embarrassed shade of scarlet. He traced a distracting finger over her shoulder, a sound between a chuckle and a seductive, creeper-like hiss escaping his throat and rumbling against her back. She crossed his wiggling eyebrows with narrowed eyes.

"You're insufferable," she bleated, kicking him away. "Get out."

He complied with a chuckle. "I deserved that."

He sat up on the edge of their makeshift bed and stretched. Then he got up and dressed in his hunting clothes and light armour. Puffy at first was still rolled away, pretending to sulk, only stealing occasional looks here and there. However, she easily folded when she saw him fiddle with a loose buckle on his cuirass, sitting up and tightening it for him and helping him

adjust his trident's harness. She also adjusted the rest of his leather armour. She smoothed out a crease in his cape.

He let her fuss over him with nothing but a smile and an immaculately still stance. When she pulled back, satisfied, he thanked her by leaning down and leaving one last, deep kiss on her temple.

He headed towards the door.

Puffy quickly pulled a blanket over her and scrambled to the end of the island of cushions. She reached out to him.

"Sammy."

When Sam turned back, she hooked her fingers into the sides of his cuirass, yanked him down to her level, and kissed him properly.

The blanket slipped from around her shoulders, but she barely noticed. All she could feel was him. Nothing else mattered anymore. Sam cupped her cheeks.

"Darling, I need to go," he whispered, face still pressed against hers.

"Shh, just a little longer."

Sam didn't fight. If anything, he caved in. He deepened their embrace, practically melting against her. Puffy was so close to pulling him back into bed with her. Something compelled her to, strongly. It took all of her might to resist.

Closing her eyes, she dove back beneath the surface and met his lips again. For a moment, as he kissed her back, she thought he might stay by his own volition. Alas, after another minute or two, Sam backed out of reach. She kept leaning forward, chasing him until a gentle stroke to her jaw brought her back to reality.

"I'll be back soon," he promised. "We can pick up where we left off later, hm?"

"I'll be waiting," she replied. "I always will."

"Always?"

"And forever, my love." She gave him a final, playful peck on the end of his nose. "Have fun."

"We'll certainly try."

He picked up his trident by the threshold. He lingered for another second or two.

Everything looked better in the early sunlight, and only made him glow so much brighter, like a star.

The metal hints on his leather armour, belt and harness buckles glittered like diamonds, as did his eyes. Two emeralds embedded in pure, inky darkness, still somehow brighter than anything else in the bedchamber, in the whole world. Love bites from the night before bloomed into red and purple flowers on his neck, poorly concealed by the tight neck of his uniform and the green velvet of his cloak. His smile made her want to kiss him a thousand times again.

If given the choice, she'd do it all over again. For this, for him, for them to be like this over and over again. She'd never tire of it.

Him, handsome, smiling, in love, loved.

Her, sinking into a soft sea, smiling, in love, loved too.

She knew right then and there this was the image of him she'd hold on to for eternity. It was her perfect picture, her perfect moment kept close to her heart as long as it still beat, and would haunt her soul until Time and oblivion dared erase it.

Sam gave her one last wink and left, leaving the door slightly ajar behind him.

"I'm surprised you got up at all," grunted a voice from outside.

"Good morning to you too."

"Had fun last night?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure sounded like it."

"I don't think that's any of your business, sir."

"It is when I thought there was a murder afoot at one point. I almost barged in swinging my axe in your faces."

"Stop listening through the walls."

"Put me in a different room and I wouldn't be forced to."

"You're literally at the other end of the corridor."

"Well that just shows you how loud you two can get."

"Piglins have refined hearing though, don't they?"

"Don't try and turn this on me, Your Majesty."

"Oh yeah, Techno, gods forbid I give my gorgeous wife everything she asks for—"

Puffy didn't hear the rest of the conversation as the voices faded into the distance, but she smiled.

When Technoblade and Sam entered the courtyard, Seapeekay ran up to them, two horses in tow.

"We were just about to go and find you," he said, handing them the reins.

"They weren't too hard to come by," Techno replied with a smirk, "all I had to do was follow the lovey-dovey coos."

Sam pulled on his riding gloves and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I spent some quality time with my wife, what about it?"

"Where is she, by the way?" the fox asked, peering behind the King.

"She's not coming."

"Really? Why's that?"

"He just told you," Techno snickered, "'quality time'."

"Oh... *Oh*." Seapeekay's eyes suddenly grew wider with understanding. There was no way he wasn't flushing under his fur.

Sam shook his head and mounted his stallion. "Honestly Techno, it sounds like you're jealous."

"No sir," the piglin denied, following suit and settling in the saddle. "Romance isn't my thing at all, except when I can tease you two about it. There's definitely an upside to being a constant third wheel."

Matters of the heart weren't really Techno's area of expertise but he could see the obvious signs. Sam's love story had been one he had followed practically from the front row since the SMP, and he'd have a feeling he'd stay there for a while to come. Romantic love was not his thing, but there was no denying he found it beautiful in many ways, no matter what his teasing implied.

There was also no denying it made people better: more wary, more attentive, kinder and more empathetic. Technoblade had a feeling Sam wouldn't have been as beloved and humane a king if his heart had remained one of stone and obsidian prison halls with no escape.

Even when he gave out orders, he was assertive but not cold or unfeeling. His voice reached every ear like it was meant for every individual, not a slice of his army amassed together.

"This patrol is *not* a provocative one," he reminded his soldiers, cantering to the head of the garrison. "We are riding with minimum gear and weapons for a reason. The South is a country that I have built on peace for a long time now, and I would like to keep it that way, understood? If this patrol happens to come across Corpse, I want you to follow my orders to the letter. No matter what happens, we do not draw first blood. We fight with words and reason rather than swords, but we will not back down from a battle if it's necessary. You have served your kingdom well thus far, and by remaining calm and in line you will serve it well again. Is that understood?"

The speech was met by cries of agreement. Seapeekay led the procession out of the castle gates, the soldiers' steeds clopping behind in single file. Technoblade and Sam stayed off to the side to close off the rear.

That was when more hoofbeats rushed across the courtyard, softer and smaller, but still just as energetic and determined as the army's.

"Pa, I need to talk to you," Michelle yelled, rushing to grab Sam's horse's reins.

He looked down at her fondly, but tried to pry the leather bridle from her trotters. "Now's not the time," he chided gently, "we're just about to head off. You can tell me later."

"No, I can't."

Technoblade did a double take. He had never heard her speak so harshly and seriously, and especially not to her father. She even stood in his path with a determined stance the piglin was certain not even he'd be able to knock over. Sam seemed to have been taken just as aback as Techno had been, and he stalled his steed.

Up ahead, beneath the portcullis, Seapeekay had also slowed to a standstill. He watched the scene with growing curiosity, but not surprise. Technoblade knew what shock and confusion looked like on a man or beast; he had been confronted with them too many times in his lives to count. That fox wasn't surprised. It almost seemed like he had expected something like this to happen.

"Michelle, what's going on?" Sam asked her. His tone had turned a lot more firmer.

She still didn't back down. She didn't seem fazed by the horse's large body thrashing so close to hers, nor the gaze in her father's eyes pleading her to move out of the way before she was crushed.

Instead, she dropped a bombshell.

"I want to give up my title."

Technoblade had certainly not expected *that*.

With that pushed out, Michelle took a deep breath and squared up to her father's steed. The stallion backed away, licking the bit between its teeth.

"I want to give up my rank as the Crown Princess," she continued, voice strong and smooth, as if she had rehearsed that line countless times beforehand, "and I want to join the royal guard instead."

Technoblade had certainly not expected that either, but he would be lying if he didn't admit he was pleasantly surprised.

"I love you," she pressed to add, "I love you and Ma so much, but I don't want to be a princess anymore. I'll never be a good one, and I don't want to be. It's not my thing. Fighting and defending the kingdom is. I'm happier in the training grounds than I'd ever be wearing a crown."

With every passing sentence that grew her confidence, Techno's own pride swelled too. To see such a young soul know where to go and figure herself out the way she was always was a nice thing to see. The sense of independence Technoblade often craved and ended up confusing with

loneliness more often than not was reflected in her, in her choices and the way she went about them.

Technoblade was proud of her, and he knew Sam would be too to have such a headstrong daughter.

He *thought* Sam would be proud too.

"Absolutely not."

Everything froze in shock. His voice was cold, and harder than bedrock. It was harder than even when he spoke to his army. It was harder than when he put the troublesome Western ambassador in their place.

It was the Warden's voice.

It was almost terrifying.

Michelle gaped at him. "W-What?"

"You're not going to join the guard."

"Why not?"

"You're just not, and that's my final answer."

Just like that, a decision was made. No discussion with Puffy, no questions, no explanation. A harsh refusal that scared away all rebuttals.

Almost all rebuttals.

"No," Michelle said, still not believing a word her father was saying, "you can't just say *no*! You've seen me fight, I'm capable, I'm more capable than anyone, ask Uncle Techno! He knows! He taught me—"

"Michelle—"

"—and I've only got better since! The work won't be too hard for me, I'll stick it out, and one day I'll become a general and I'll help the South—"

"Michelle, stop it."

She did, surprisingly enough. The order even chilled Techno to the bone.

Sam's glare was haunting. "You're not joining the guard, and that's that. No child of mine is going to risk their lives needlessly ever again."

"I used to fight pirates!"

"Yes, why else do you think your mother and I decided to finally settle down? What do you think persuaded her that the South was our best bet at a safe and stable life? We've lost a child to war, and another one who decided to stay behind in a place soiled by it. We're not going to lose another, mark my words."

Little did Sam know, those words of his were indeed marked, but by Technoblade instead of by Michelle.

She only stood there in shock and horror as the dreams in her eyes came crashing down all around her.

Sam's tone softened. Regardless of the argument afoot, Techno knew he'd melt at the first sign of tears. "Sweetheart, we can't all get what we want," he said to her. "We each have to make sacrifices in order to do what's good."

Techno could hear the pain in his tone. Michelle, apparently, did not.

"You're *literally* a king!" she protested, indignant.

"Exactly."

Sam spurred his horse forwards.

Michelle watched him go, the spring in her step now completely gone. She didn't run after him, she didn't yell, she didn't do anything. Anything, except turning to her uncle with desperate eyes.

"Is he angry?" she asked in a small voice, so much smaller than she was, smaller than her presence and usually high and lively self was.

Technoblade was lost for words. He couldn't lie even if he wanted to. "I don't know."

"Can you talk to him," she begged, "please?"

He could try, although it promised to be hard. He still nodded.

"For what it's worth," he told her before he left, "I'm happy for you. You'll make an excellent general one day."

It was enough to fan the flame a little more. She smiled and ran up to hug his leg before he left.

Making promises was easier than keeping them. When Technoblade caught up with Sam, a ball lumped in his throat. He and Seapeekay shared a look and before the piglin could open his mouth, Sam did.

"Did you know about this?" he questioned the fox.

The captain bowed his head. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Again, Sam was hard to read. He seemed neither relieved nor furious, or even surprised in the slightest.

"She's a fast learner," Technoblade finally spoke up. "She has the potential to become a great warrior like her parents."

"And that's exactly what I don't want," Sam answered back. "We've been through hell, and I don't want my little girl to have to do the same. I am not going to let History repeat the same mistakes it made with Tommy and Tubbo."

Somewhere in the explanation, Techno could sense that History wasn't the only one who had made mistakes he wanted to avoid again.

Sam had been there in the crowd at the Red Festival, where Technoblade had taken one of Tubbo's lives and had scarred him for the rest. As many had done back then, he had stayed back in shock, not knowing what to do, drowning in the confusion all around him.

And Tommy?

Everyone had failed Tommy, no matter how good their intentions were or how powerful their love. It was as simple as that.

But this was a different place, in a different time. This was not the SMP. This was Michelle's own choice.

However, Sam's silence told Techno that he wasn't ready or willing to embark on that debate anytime soon.

Coming out of the city walls, they turned off and headed West. Once out in the open fields and prairies, the garrison spurred their steeds into a steady gallop.

The South was a decently sized realm, to say the least. It would take them a good four and a half hours on fast horseback to reach the stretch of land where the sightings had occurred, and another good two to reach the Western border if the need came to be. They were lucky they had set off so

early, and even luckier that Tina was the only one smart enough to bother packing them supplies, just in case. It was better to be safe than sorry.

Technoblade didn't mind long journeys. He had spent most of his life on the road. That was how he met Phil, Sam, and how he ended up in the South in the first place. Travelling always brought good things his way.

The road they took allowed him to appreciate the kingdom he was now a part of.

The South was a vast and thriving kingdom in both land and politics. Its varied landscapes offered a multitude of possibilities both economically and defense-wise. The mountains were rich with ores, the swamps with healing herbs, plants and animals that made it a paradise for scientists and biologists, the forests with timber and the plains with space to build and farm to heart's desire.

In that way, it reminded Technoblade a lot of the SMP, minus the constant turmoil. If there were to be problems, they had a thousand different ways to solve them, and two of the smartest monarchs alive to rely on.

Well, there was *almost* no sign of turmoil.

They arrived at their destination, a farming town at the edge of a forest. Immediately, the issue was clear.

And it was more than a simple sighting.

"Pillagers," Techno growled, watching in horror as the thatched roofs went up in flames.

"They never venture this far into the kingdom," Seapeekay said, already drawing his sword. "Unless..."

"Unless someone knew of and led them through the unguarded paths," Sam finished, eyes forward.

There, in the middle of the carnage, darting between the screams and the flames, was their target. Even from afar, Corpse's amber stare stood out from the rest of the chaos, unchanged from when they had last seen him.

Seapeekay turned to the King. "Your orders?"

"Evacuate the people, take down the pillagers. If you can, bring Corpse to me alive."

So much for probably not needing to fight.

In one swift movement, swords, axes and Sam's trident were unsheathed and brandished high. Horses crashed forward in a wave, galloping down the hilly slopes towards the smouldering hellfire.

Technoblade never realized how awful a warfield was until he was back in the middle of one. In a striking change, peace had become his norm and bloodshed his dreaded bane. The moment the first discernable scream reached him, he felt his veins freeze. With no maddened voices shrieking in delight, he finally saw it all for what it was.

For a second, he was rooted in place, surrounded by fire, flames and flailing blades crashing against each other and tearing through innocent flesh. Fleeting shadows of panicked townsfolk dashed behind the smoke, chased swiftly by more silhouettes armed with crossbows, hatchets and flaming torches. It was the first time he really saw carnage for what it was.

Horrifying, completely and utterly horrifying.

And like he always did, Technoblade leapt into it blade-first.

His mind had forgotten what war was really like, but his body had not. It was a machine rearing to go again after so long, powered by a long gone but not forgotten thing that had plagued his life for decades. Thrust back into the chaos, he moved and fought valiantly as if he had never left it in the first place.

Technoblade? The murderer of emperors, crusher of souls and kingdoms? Feared by the gods? Why, he's as sweet and fluffy as candyfloss, the nobles in the Southern court would happily tell any visitor who asked them about the piglin.

How naive they really were.

The beast inside had never truly left. The killer of kings, bane of the gods and a Pandora's Box of screaming nightmares had never left. It was always there, just under the surface of his skin, a layer that was docile until watered and nurtured into bloom with the right conditions.

The only thing that had truly changed was who was in control. Technoblade called the shots now, not the voices. He wasn't completely lost in his frenzy. He could snap out easily and at will.

It was exactly what he did when he helped the townspeople. Alongside fierce axe-swings that split pillagers in two, he helped families out of the rubble of

their homes, piled children onto his steed to keep them out of harm's way, and held crumbling thresholds up long enough for trapped victims to escape and make a break for it.

However gracious his efforts were, they didn't stop the seemingly neverending waves of attackers washing through the streets. They didn't stop the mounting danger of them either.

The first few pillagers were on foot, armed with damaged weapons and torches. The next few waves saw more appear on horseback with sharpened swords and sporting powerful longbows. The true horror, however, came from a deep, gravelly bellow. A lumbering mass of muscle rose over the horizon, barreling its way through houses and knocking stone structures down without a care. Two sharp horns impaled and maimed as it shook its head, and its beady eyes shot stares more piercing than the downpours of flaming arrows.

A ravager.

The town was going to be torn to the ground.

Whether the soldiers realized the bloodthirsty rage that had overcome Techno, they didn't make a comment. They didn't seem to care, or if they did it would have probably been perceived with relief. Any help was worth it, especially now the bull-like monster's presence was made known to all.

"Do not engage!" Seapeekay yelled to his garrison, loud enough to be heard by them even as they were speckled around the burning streets. "Do not engage!"

That would be easier said than done, all things considered. The horses had bolted, and no one had ever outrun a ravager on foot before. Not even Technoblade.

The luckiest he had ever been with one was a young calf, not fully trained by its pillager master and still paying more attention to food than to orders. The next ravager he had confronted was fully grown and had almost taken his entire hand off. It had also claimed one of his lives. He wasn't about to let it happen again.

That said, the fight was indeed oddly tempting. Technoblade almost wished it would come just close enough—

"What are you doing?" A hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him backwards. "Move!"

He folded and drew his eyes away, fleeing the street and darting through a darkened alley, hot on Sam's heels. It was cool compared to the scorching heat of the bonfire the town had become, and he could breathe something other than smoke and strangled screams.

Sam stopped at the end of the alley, peeking out into the light and darting back into the dark when the ravager charged past.

He turned to Technoblade. "You alright?"

"Never better," the piglin lied through his teeth, face twisting as he wiped off a fresh blood splatter. He had almost forgotten how annoying it was to get out of his matted fur.

Sam looked to be in a better state than Techno. His cheeks were red from the flames and dirty from the black soot, but otherwise he didn't seem to have sustained any injuries. All the blood on him wasn't his. That was reassuring.

His frown was not.

"Any sign of Corpse?" he asked.

Technoblade shook his head. "Most of our garrison is still alive, and I just saw reinforcements riding in. The pillagers are being dealt with."

There were only two problems still on the loose: Corpse, and the ravager, the latter of which was charging towards the temple in the town center and crushing the pillars with hard snaps of its powerful jaws. If Technoblade knew anything about mortal fear, it was that they turned to the higher powers to help.

Sam must have been thinking the same thing.

"If it tears the temple down, it'll kill everyone inside."

No surprises there.

"What do we do about it?" asked Technoblade.

He had a great many plans in mind, but he had a feeling Puffy would murder him if he ever told her he had dragged Sam into any of them. Unfortunately, he didn't have to say a word.

"I'll draw the ravager into the forest," Sam decided. The piglin followed his gaze as it landed on a nearby horse fighting against the rein tied to a water

trough, a bow and a quiver hanging on the saddle. "You evacuate the temple."

"Nope, absolutely not. That's crazy. You're crazy."

Puffy would berate him even further if she found out Technoblade had let Sam carry out any of his risky plans. He may as well just throw himself under the ravager's feet and save her the trouble of killing him.

"Come on, Protesilaus," Sam said, almost laughing as he slipped his trident back into its harness, "where's your courage gone?"

Technoblade didn't have the time to answer that. He didn't have the time to stop him either.

Sam rushed out of the alley, making a beeline for the horse. He leapt onto its back, cut the rope and snatched up the bow. An arrow sailed through the air and hit the ravager square in the flank. It bounced off its tough, leathery skin and clattered to the cobbles, but it was still enough.

The ravager let out a whale-like bellow and pushed itself away from the temple's foundations. The whole building shook and part of its facade bent in along the crack. Its rider cracked their whip and directed it towards the disturbance.

Sam took off his crown and waved it high in the air. The sun and the glowing fires caught the golden glimmer and the shine of the colourful jewels. The horse beneath him reared up, tossing its mane. The ash-laden wind billowed up his cape.

Even in the midst of the fight, it was picturesque. Daedalus glittered with the bright and bold beauty of a stained glass window.

"How would you like to chase the King himself?"

Very much, judging from the way the ravager enthusiastically threw itself down the street. Sam turned his steed around and spurred it forwards. Thundering footsteps and galloping hooves disappeared into the distance.

Nevermind, Puffy was probably going to kill Sam instead.

Technoblade rushed out of his hiding place and across the street, dodging the arrows whizzing over his head. Fortunately, they were not aimed at him, but shot by his own allies at the last few remaining pillagers.

Technoblade had to give credit where credit was due; the South had a quick and effective army. Perhaps it wasn't the strongest in terms of determination—he doubt he'd see anything like the united armies of the SMP's own war drive ever again—nor camaraderie—as Corpse's betrayal had shown quite well—but under Seepeekay's command they were well prepared for any eventuality, knew how to wield a decent variety of weapons, and the soldiers worked well individually as well as in organized teams to snatch up victories wherever they fought. The final waves of pillagers had been no match for them.

"Any sign of Corpse?" Technoblade asked Seepeekay.

The fox shook his head and rushed alongside him, struggling to keep up with his pace. "What are you doing?"

"We're evacuating the temple, now! Get the rest of your men to put out the fires."

Seapeekay saluted. "Yes, sir!"

Sometimes, Technoblade wondered who really was the South's highest ranking general: the one who had been named as such, or the old and cranky anarchist uncle they pulled out of the swamp some two years ago. It seemed to change every so often, but now was not the time to remind Seapeekay he didn't have to obey each one of Techno's passing orders-that-were-not-meant-to-be-taken-as-orders. Damn his past reputation or the stories told about him; the South functioned principally on titles, and he had decided to take none.

However, at this moment, he was glad the army did act quickly at his command.

The building was going to fall.

Technoblade didn't even bother with any polite introduction. He burst into the temple, breaking through the barricaded doors and yelled outright.

"If you want to live, get out!"

His yell, more fearsome than any war cry or divine order, worked a charm. The people, once huddling in pews and as close to the altars as possible, now all bolted towards the door and the outside world they had all been too terrified to ever risk seeing again.

The heavens—or rather the roof—shook and he looked up. The ivory and gold eyes of the temple's deity stared back, gaze frozen in contempt and pursed lips judging their every move.

Only heretics would drag the frightened sheep away from their shepherd, the god's silence whispered. *Why would you commit such blasphemy?*

Because they're all going to die otherwise, duh, Techno replied, rolling his eyes at the statue's sheer inability to understand, well, anything really.

He was proven right a second later when yet another rumble echoed through the air. The heavens of painted brick, mortar and tiles cracked open, letting the orange sky thick with smoke peep through. It sparked more panic into the devotees. They moved faster.

Seapeekay rushed around for a last minute check of the darker corners and gave Techno the thumbs up. Such a happy sign for such a devastating situation, but it did the job.

They rounded up the last few and closed the crowd on their rush out. Behind them, the temple crumbled and fell, well and truly abandoned by the gods by that point. The only thing able to save the stragglers were the mortal soldiers of the Southern monarchy.

It was nothing new.

Technoblade had learned to stop putting his trust in beings too cowardly to even show themselves properly. It was a wonder why anyone still worshiped them. No, the carnage was not in their divine plans, or whatever other excuse people came up with.

This plan was a traitor's and a traitor's alone. Not for the first time, Technoblade was annoyed Sam hadn't killed Corpse when he had the opportunity.

Chances were Sam was kicking himself too. At least, the piglin assumed he was.

Once the fires had been put out, the casualties rounded up and the dead lined up in front of the steps of the temple that was no longer there, Technoblade realized Sam was nowhere to be found.

He searched through the remains of the town, asked the townsfolk and the guards, but no one had seen the King since the original charge.

Technoblade hadn't seen him since he led the ravager away.

He wasn't worried, as such. His stomach didn't twist and his head didn't overheat with flashes of the worst case scenarios. He just had to find him and bring him back. It was as simple as that.

He followed the trail of broken buildings and torn up roads in the direction he had last seen Sam ride towards. It wasn't a hard search: ravagers had to have gotten their name from somewhere, after all.

As expected, the debris led him straight to the edge of the forest. The path of destruction continued straight through it, a striking cut in the wood's natural beauty.

Nothing living lay inside the path, nor anywhere near it. The ravager's passage had sucked away the world entirely, it seemed. Birds had stopped singing. The wind had stopped blowing. The leaves and flowers didn't shudder or bend in his wake. Everything was still, silent, motionless. It was as if Time had frozen, and only Techno held the power to walk through it all nonetheless. The sky hanging over the forest was bright, the carnage of the town not too far ignored entirely.

That should have been the first clue something was wrong.

Technoblade kept going, treading cautiously. At one point, he took out his axe again and rolled the handle nervously in his palm.

Nothing stirred to attack him, and nothing stirred to flee either. The suspension between life and death was still hanging strong.

He saw the limp body of the ravager's rider, pinned to the ground by an arrow. He walked on.

Next, he saw the white horse, weakly thrashing with all the energy it had left, even while missing a leg. He put it out of its misery and walked on.

The uprooted birch trees and snapped branches curved over his head and the prints of heavy, charging feet trampled the vegetation into a thick, quiet carpet of green. Even Technoblade's footsteps were silenced, now; even he was no more than an assimilated part of the deathly immobility.

It was like he was walking through the arched aisle of a place of worship, a natural church so much holier than the gilded temples so eager to please the eye rather than the soul. Techno would have even called it beautiful, had it not been for the shadow looming at the end of the tunnel.

The ravager lay on its side, saddle tattered and hanging by strips of shredded leather. Its glassy eyes saw nothing more, and its sharp horns

would maim no longer. Planted deep into its only weak spot, its softer underbelly, was a trident. Its owner was nowhere to be found.

Finally, Technoblade felt his stomach churn. He tried to avert his gaze from the worrying amount of blood on the end of the beast's horns and looked around.

There was no sign of its slayer.

Nothing except for a bloody handprint pressed deep against the pure white trunk of a birch tree.

It was so out of place, so striking. It wasn't normal.

Something was wrong, *very* wrong.

He didn't call Sam's name. He didn't run back to the town for help. He didn't even dare pray to the gods, out of pure spite.

All Technoblade did was keep going.

The bloody handprint wasn't the only one. He soon realized there were everywhere, crimson stains among the birch, painting him a rather macabre treasure map to... somewhere. The handprints varied in direction and angle, as if the bleeding victim had stumbled through the forest in a daze, catching himself on anything he could as he tripped off to... somewhere, again.

And now Techno was following that same path. It went on for quite a while, and he only picked up the pace when he realized how much blood there actually was. Every print was just as vivid as the last. It was never ending.

This could be Techno's own personal hell for all he knew: blindly following a river of blood through a forest full of straight white trees closing in around him with every step and turn. A forest of bright and pale nightmares, a liminal space he couldn't escape from even if he tried.

He didn't, he couldn't.

He was reaching a clearing.

The handprints disappeared.

The sky peeking between the canopy's dome was bright and blue, speckled with fluffy white clouds. A shallow stream guzzled in a rocky bed, glittering in the sunlight. Lush bushes of buttercups and daisies sprouted out between

the rocks and dipped their dainty petals into the current. Some were carried away entirely, decorating the rushing waters with spots of soft confetti.

It was beautiful, but Technoblade's heart skipped a beat.

A stag had its nose buried in something half in the stream, half on the bank. It raised its head as the piglin approached and bounded away without another look.

Technoblade finally got to see what it was.

A body.

It was one Techno would have known so well, if he could believe it was him. He couldn't.

It couldn't be.

"Sam?"

There was no response, not even a single twitch of a finger. The cape was twisted beneath him in an odd, uncomfortable and unnatural way, pulling at his neck. The water beneath him ran with a steady stream of crimson. Smashed vials of different potions littered the ground and the rocks on the bank, a failed attempt at scrambling for aid.

Technoblade moved closer. He cocked his ears, searching for a sign. Any sign at all. There had to be.

This was not how his story ended.

It was too simple, too reckless.

It was a stupid accident.

Sam couldn't die in a *stupid* accident.

Especially not a stupid accident Technoblade knew he could have prevented if he had just spoken up and—

"Daedalus, this isn't funny. Get up."

Not even the fading memory of the Syndicate could rouse him.

Technoblade finally reached out and rolled him over.

It was when he finally saw the sickening hole in his abdomen—so deep he was sure the bones had been ground up into fine dust and he was bleeding out the other side, his back pierced clean through—that the truth slapped him in the face. Hard.

It was almost as painful as the retching rollercoaster in his stomach. He weakly tried to nudge him awake once again, to no avail.

Their first meeting had Sam saving him from pillagers. Their last had Technoblade failing that exact same task.

"It was never meant for him."

Technoblade spun around. He growled. "Then why do it?"

Corpse, as always, remained passive. "You think I'm a monster, and maybe I am to some degree, but I'm a loyal one. I would never kill the King."

"So who were you trying to lure?"

"Take a wild guess."

Techno expected to see him pull a weapon and kill him right there and then. Corpse did nothing. The piglin turned back to Sam's body, picked him up and held him close. He didn't cry, he simply hugged him tight, desperate to get him far away from that piercing amber stare.

"If the South slowly fell to the control of the outcasts and the West, maybe he would have seen sense and banished the criminals in his court. Instead, that love and loyalty to them killed him."

What a masterplan.

Technoblade gritted his teeth. "Love and loyalty didn't kill him, you did."

"So did you. You let him lure the ravager away. You left him to fight it alone. Who's the real culprit here?"

Technoblade jerked his body around and threw his axe. It embedded itself blade-first into a tree trunk where Corpse should have been. He wasn't anymore.

The traitor had slipped between their fingers, once again. He came and went as he pleased, a shadow of death and corruption that glided in and out like a ghost. He could be gone, but he would be far from forgotten. He'd be remembered vividly by a few.

Technoblade would.

Oh, how he *would*, and gladly so. He'd harness that vengeance for as long as he could, until simple hatred turned to pure, deadly poison.

He'd go and hunt him down now, if his body would ever obey him again.

He couldn't let Sam go, cradling him to his own chest like a baby bird. He wasn't a bird. He was a monarch, a genius, a warrior, and his friend. One of his best and most loyal friends.

Was.

There was no way to sugarcoat it. Technoblade wanted to cry, to sob as loud and erratically as he did for Philza, but he couldn't. He couldn't let himself.

Everything was made of stone, from his body to his face, even to his heart. Nothing seemed to beat or stir anymore. Unknowingly, the South had frozen along with their King.

He picked up the crown lying at the bottom of the stream and laid it back on Sam's head. Silver water droplets drizzled in front of his half-lidded eyes that Techno quickly shut with a soft stroke of his fingers. He wrapped Sam's cloak around his abdomen.

He would give him his dignity, if nothing else, if he couldn't give a tear.

He hauled Sam's body into his arms and left the clearing. He brought him back to the town and unleashed the horrifying truth amongst the people and the army. Seapeekay practically threw himself down to the ground with tears in his eyes. When they loaded the rest of their dead back onto their horses, Techno refused to let anyone touch the King's body and decided to ride with him on his lap. As the palace-bound procession set off with grey clouds pushing down on each of their heads, Technoblade dreaded what would happen next.

The worst was yet to come, and Technoblade had no idea how he was going to break it to her.

The sun had just started setting by the time Puffy finally looked up from her desk.

"Evening, already?" she groaned, rubbing her head.

"Evening already," Tina agreed, turning the tea pot upside-down. "And we didn't even get a refill."

Puffy pushed herself away from the long series of maps spread out over the council's table, the only one big enough to lay them all out. The sextant and astrolabe were cast aside and quite frankly, after spending more than eight hours straight fiddling with them, she never wanted to lay eyes on them again.

"At least we got the course charted," she sighed. "We're closer to the SMP than I thought."

"What's close?"

"A month at sea, maybe two."

"Damn," Tina whistled. "Someone's going to have to watch the throne for a while."

"Just for six months," Puffy assured her, "and anyway, it's not like we'll be away with no contact at all. Boomer and Seapeekay will know what to do."

"I could play Queen," Tina suggested brightly, grabbing Puffy's diadem and putting it on her own head. "I already look the part."

She laughed. "Oh no, you're coming with us!"

"But it's fun!"

"Exactly why we won't trust you with it! You'll mount a coup against us and we'll never end up coming back."

The bells rang outside, signaling the garrison's return.

Puffy took the second of distraction to snatch her headpiece back. "Now what would the King think of all this?"

"I don't know." Tina nudged her and ran out the door. "Let's find out!"

Only a close friend of the Queen could have gotten away with pushing her out of the way to snag a victory and making her laugh. Puffy did have to admit however that the sudden start was incredibly unfair. She had to rush to clear up her work first before the debrief meeting later that evening, and then rush down through the halls and corridors of the palace.

She wasn't used to such sudden playful games anymore, and unfortunately she had to hand the victory over to Tina.

But her friend didn't seem happy about it.

As Puffy reached the throne room, Tina ran towards her. Instead of a cocky smile on her face and a string of triumphant cries, she rushed towards her with wide glassy eyes and stuttered syllables.

She grabbed Puffy's arms. "Don't go out."

"What?"

"Please, Puffy!"

Tina was using all of her strength to push her away from the doors, the wide open entrance to the throne room through which spilled the hazy orange dusk.

Puffy took a step forward.

Tina's hands tightened their grip. "Don't."

She was the Queen. She could do as she pleased.

Out in the courtyard, just as the bells told them, was the garrison from that day's mission to the Western border. She had watched them leave from the window that morning, but they weren't the same ones who had come back. They couldn't have been.

The battalion that had left the palace had been prim and proper, and in relatively high spirits. The few that remained looked more like stragglers, burned, bruised and bloody. Their numbers had dwindled, as had their morale.

Horses were led away by grooms and squires: some riders had dismounted, others lay limply across their saddles. Servants and fellow guards alike followed with cries of shock as friends and lovers lay amongst them.

Something twisted and sank deep inside Puffy. She went to find the closest and most trusted source she could.

"Captain, what happened?"

"Corpse's allies include the pillagers from the northwest, judging by the reported route they took and the angle of attack. The pillagers were taken

out rather easily and we sorted out the fires. We've promised them relief benefits, and we'll likely have to rebuild the whole town from scratch..."

Seapeekay wasn't looking at her. He kept his head down, focused on his scratched and bleeding hands. His words were whispered, tiptoeing around something.

He wasn't telling her everything.

"Seapeekay, what happened?"

"We also haven't found out if he has any Western affiliations or protection—"

His hands fiddled faster. His body shook, except for his tail and his ears that remained drooped and plastered down.

Puffy tried to catch his gaze, "Tell me."

He looked up for a second, and that second was enough for her to glimpse his unfocused, glassy eyes.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and scampered off into Tina's arms.

She didn't go after him.

A group of alarmed faces began to congregate around the last steed to trot through the portcullis. Its rider paid no heed to them and slipped off his saddle, hand laid sadly on the pommel.

Puffy called his name, "Techno! Where's Sam?"

Technoblade barely acknowledged her. He gathered up something on his steed. Puffy knew who it was the moment she spied the green and the trident slipped on the piglin's back.

She yelled Sam's name as loud as she could. Her own voice couldn't get past the rushing blood in her ears.

She practically clawed her way through the crowd, pushing and shoving people aside without a care. She was still yelling, at least she thought she was. She couldn't hear. She couldn't feel. She could barely see.

The moment her fingers made contact with Sam's arm, she lost herself completely. She tried to forcefully pull him from Techno, and he let her. Both she and Sam collapsed to the cobbled ground, his weight taking her down heavily. She scraped her knees and twisted her ankle, but she didn't care.

There was blood. Blood everywhere.

"Sam!" She shook him violently. "Sam, what happened? Talk to me! Wake up!"

He didn't stir.

There was a scream.

Michelle.

Technoblade immediately rushed over.

Puffy heard only gibberish. She saw only blurs. Sam's horrifying stomach wound soaked her front, spreading crimson across everything it touched.

She snapped her head up and glared at the rest of the courtyard around her. None of them were moving. None of them were doing anything of use. They were all simply watching the scene from a good distance away, leaving Puffy and Sam to drown in the solitude of a puddle of blood pressed between them.

"Don't just stand there!" she screamed at them, a choked sob strangling her voice. Their figures all became blurry. "Get a healer! Get potions! Do something!"

They didn't.

"He is your *King*! You need to help him!"

They still didn't do anything, and Puffy turned to her last hope. Technoblade had spent a whole month of his life devoted to saving Sam's own, and he had managed. He could do it. He too stood further away, turning Michelle's head into his chest and holding her still.

"Techno!" she yelled, desperately reaching for him. "You've saved him before, you can do it again!"

He stayed as still as a statue.

"You have to do it again!"

"Puffy—"

"Do what you did last time. Every healer is under your command, just please do it."

"|—"

"Do *something*!"

"Puffy..."

"That is an order!"

Technoblade said nothing, but scrunched his face up and turned away. His grip on Michelle grew visibly tighter. As his shoulders slumped, the young piglin's sobs grew louder.

He was disobeying an order. He was ignoring a Queen. She could have him executed if she wanted to. She almost did, if she could get anything but a couple of shaking breaths out.

Puffy sat there in shock and stupor. Her throat tightened. Her eyes stung, and for a moment she was alone.

Alone, except for Sam; still unmoving, still frozen.

She heaved him higher into her arms.

"Sam," she whispered, stammering and yet still trying to put on a smile, "you have to wake up..."

She cupped his cold cheek and embraced his chapped lips. They were still strong with the lingering smell of gunpowder and the burning, bloody carnage he had been carried back from. Burns and bruises littered his cheeks, his skin grey with soot.

"Please..."

She kissed him again and again, hoping desperately that he'd reach out and pull her closer, that he'd smile and call her "darling", that he'd tell her it was just a scratch, that he'd had worse, that he'd be fine in a couple of days—that he'd move at all.

His eyes were closed. His limbs were limp. The heartbeat she was so used to hearing and feeling drum against her own was no longer there. There wasn't even a wisp of a breath escaping between his slightly-parted mouth. She didn't stop. She kissed him and murmured in his ears and carded her hand through his sweaty, matted hair until her fingers cramped, and then some.

A single chime rang out.

It echoed from somewhere deep in the palace, from the temple's steeple hidden from view behind the turrets and towers and high walls.

It was deep and brooding, and chilled her to her core. It wasn't any ordinary bell ring.

It was a tocsin, the one reserved for the monarchs and the monarchs alone. The whole kingdom stopped in its tracks.

One chime was all it took.

One chime finally made her understand.

All the excuses were stripped away, all the denial and all the rage and all the bargains she tried to make. Underneath it all remained her own beating heart, seemingly the only sliver of hope in her left—until realization's sharp knife pierced it straight through. It was a cold and jagged blade, impossible to get out and frozen with despair and desperation. It slid in so easily, so smoothly. She barely felt it, at first. Then it twisted, hard and abrupt.

She screamed as high as the agony would let her.

It tore her clean apart, stabbing her in the chest again and again and again with no relent. Every blow made her crumble more and more, until she was light-headed. Until she was out of her own soul entirely. Until she couldn't feel anything but the weight of death between her arms.

No one came to help. No one came to offer comfort.

She held onto Sam's body, pulling him as close as she could. She cradled him in her lap, burying her face in his shoulder and letting her tears stream freely over his skin.

Shaking, she slotted her fingers with his and squeezed his hand tightly. Even his wedding ring was unrecognizable, stained and caked in a crimson shell of death. She still kissed it desperately, just as she kissed the rest of him over and over and over again.

In a flash, she was back in Pandora's Vault. Everything was just as it had been before, in a time long gone but not forgotten. Never forgotten.

Except this time, Sam would never wake up again.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Requiem

Puffy wanted to kill. She wanted to burn the world to the ground.

She wanted to fight the gods and throttle their little divine necks. She wanted to march an army on the heavens and tear them apart.

She wanted to...

To...

So many things.

Too many things.

None of them would make any difference. Nothing would mean anything anymore; nothing would dry her tears or lighten her heart. The world may as well have already ended, its apocalypse encapsulated in merely one death. There was no light, no darkness—nothing at all.

She kissed Sam's dead, frozen lips a million times. Every time she did, she prayed that those old children's stories were true—that her embrace could and would rouse his unmoving form and bring him back to her—and every time it didn't she crumbled a little more. When all else failed, her kisses became less about raising him and more about stealing a proper goodbye before his body was finally taken from her grasp.

People had tried a few times, but she clung on fiercely, lashing out at anyone who dared approach too near. It was only when she passed out from a light, spinning head, ceaseless tears and exhaustion that the King was finally reclaimed.

A messy, half-conscious embrace to his forehead was the last one she ever gave him.

In a matter of hours he was locked in a coffin. His head was resting on a pillow meant only for the dead, clutching his trident and dressed in ceremonial uniform and armour that was not his own. The casket was concealed beneath the kingdom's banner. The crown he had worn for two short but sweet years was laid on top, along with a single red rose whose thorns still left their deep marks in her palm. Other bouquets, mainly of white flowers, piled up underneath, concealing the trestles and making it seem like the casket was resting on nothing but a cloudy sea of dainty petals.

He lay in state in the temple. Its doors and that of the palace were thrown wide open, inviting the people to see their beloved King off to immortality.

Few attended the wake that night. Some didn't want to believe that Sam was dead. Others were pained more by the Queen's grief than the sudden loss of their King, and couldn't be there to be a witness to her plight.

It was impossible to avoid her and the crimson stain soaking the front of a now ruined dress she made no move to take off. Puffy was there every step of the mourning way, stubbornly refusing to leave Sam's side even in death. She would be there when he would finally be entombed in stone as well.

And afterwards?

Afterwards...

She couldn't even fathom that there could be one.

So there Puffy sat, alone on the steps of the altar. They had both been crowned in that exact same spot and had pronounced their eternal vows to one another. Puffy never thought they'd be here again, realities apart.

He was alive only in memory.

She was dead to the world.

If he couldn't come back to her in life, she would rather join him in Death's arms. She wouldn't dare take his place in the coffin or switch their roles; she wouldn't ever want him to feel the deep hole, the shattered shards of existence pressing into a numb and weakened body like they did into hers. She didn't want his body to eat himself alive, to gnaw and tear at everything it could until it made him sick and dizzy. She didn't want him to bear the conflicting thoughts and troubled feelings that plagued her own mind.

She loved him, and it hurt more than she could ever describe.

Her legs numbed beneath her. Her unfocused gaze blurred the whole world. There was no telling what she was looking at, if anything at all. Neither thirst or starvation made her budge. She was made of stone, chained to the quiet.

Her hand shakily came up to rest against the underside of the casket. She prayed she would feel anything, anything at all, a slight scrape or a knock. She would rip the lid open and bring Sam into her arms, fire all the physicians—and anyone, really—who had deemed him dead and take care of him herself. She would never let him out of her sight again.

Come what may.

Nothing did.

Puffy had lived on the oceans. She believed in curses as much as she did miracles. There was a superstition that ran around realms far and wide, one that had condemned as much as it had comforted. It was said that a deceased's wounds would bleed in the presence of their murderer.

But when Technoblade walked in, the casket was dry. Not even a drop came out.

He approached with slow and heavy footsteps. Every one reverberated too loudly, too solemnly. Every click of his trotters and subsequent hesitation was a knife to the silence itself. It was another blade through her, not that she felt the jab anymore.

The aisle was long, too long. Once, it had seemed short, a quick distance she had had to cross in order to start the rest of her life with the one she loved. Now, it seemed unbearable. Too long, too loud.

"Michelle's sleeping," Technoblade told her.

His gruff voice bounced off the vaulted ceiling just as agonizingly as his feet, perhaps even more so.

All Puffy could do was nod, and even that was a strain. Every move was torture.

"Do you want me to...?"

To what? He could do nothing.

He knew that. He trailed off.

A moment later, a blade hissed from its scabbard. She stood up and turned around, and found the piglin down on one knee, holding a dagger out to her. His head was bowed.

"It was me," Technoblade said, "I didn't try to talk him out of it. I could have saved him, but I didn't. I killed him. I lay down my last life at your feet. Do with it what you will."

When Puffy didn't move, he put the blade down on the floor and puffed up his chest, making the target that much bigger.

As Puffy needed it.

As if she didn't know where the blade of grief hurt the most.

As if she didn't desperately want the world to pay for what had happened.

Puffy picked up the sword. There was no hesitation in her gesture, which she knew had alarmed Technoblade.

He shouldn't have given her a choice to serve justice, then, because *gods!*—she was going to take it. She had been completely powerless, until now. She had full control. She could make things right.

She'd avenge her wounded heart right in front of Sam's dead body.

Her hands grew clammy around the hilt, and she rolled the weapon in her palms, trying to get a better grip.

Technoblade didn't use that moment of weakness from her part to overpower her, escape, or anything else.

He helped her steady the dagger and train the point to his heart. His hands wrapped around hers with ease. She could feel every callous ridge and old scar, every strand of soft fur, every rigid tension in his muscles, and above all how violently he was shaking—as fragile as a leaf, fluttering and ready to fall to the ground and disintegrate in the win, if he hadn't already.

She tried to draw back but his grip was strong.

"Please don't hesitate," he begged her quietly. His gruff voice choked up. He adjusted his hold clumsily, swallowing hard.

Puffy wanted to kill. She wanted to burn the world to the ground—but she couldn't be his executioner.

The dagger dropped to the flagstones with a clatter.

She fell with it.

Technoblade held her close. "Tell me to kill myself," he whispered, "order me to, and I will do it."

She had already, but not aloud. Not with anything but pure anger and despair filling her body and soul. It was in rage, senseless hatred, and it was before she saw a single tear roll down Techno's cheek.

She shook her head and pushed her forehead deep into the chest and heart he had offered up as a sacrifice, all for a crime he had no part in.

Murderers did not weep for their victims, and Technoblade would have never murdered Sam.

"Stay with me," she whispered, her plea slurred and as desperate as the hands that clawed at him. "Please, Techno. I can't lose you."

When Puffy let him live, he had originally planned to escape the grief, just as he always had.

He had prepared to run off in the middle of the night and never resurface in the South again. No note, no explanation would be left behind, not even a footstep. He'd erase himself again, like he had done a million times before.

No one had ever begged him to stay before. It made him wonder if he would have stayed in the Antarctic Commune if someone had taken the chance or time to.

He decided to stay in the South, and in the temple until Puffy fell into a troubled sleep. He carried her to her room, tucked her in and warned the guards at the door just in case anything was to happen.

Then, he rode out of the castle gates.

Technoblade tracked down Corpse, and he killed him.

He stripped him of all three of his lives, taking the last with a blow to the stomach. It would have been strikingly poetic had the act not been done in uncontrollable bloodlust. Even when the cat was down and already dead, Techno kept goring his body until the whole ground beneath them turned into a sea of sticky red. His tusks were completely covered in blood by the time he was done butchering the shredded remains.

With the voices gone and no witnesses, there was complete silence, save for the drips dripping off the end of his snout. No one celebrated.

Techno left Corpse's mangled body in the middle of a clearing, unburied.

He went back to the palace, and was greeted by dead silence. The cobbles in the center of the yard were stained pink. There were no souls in the courtyard, and the rare few he passed in the halls barely gave him and his bloodied body a second glance. He washed and changed.

It was while he was carrying his crimson-stained clothes to be burnt in secret that he was found out. A door opened a crack, and he stopped.

A face peeked out, but said nothing. All he could see were the shadows beneath her eyes, carved deep from tragedy of the King's death.

If Tina knew what he had done, she didn't show it. No one would have punished him for it even if they did.

Technoblade walked away.

Blood for the Blood God.

There was no triumph in that jeer anymore.

He too was going to—try to—go to bed, when his eyes landed on the small desk in the corner of his room. The untouched stack of paper and the inkwell on top beckoned his attention. They hadn't moved since they had been put there.

For letters, friends had once told him.

Technoblade had no one he wanted to send a letter to, or more accurately no one who would have wanted to receive one from him. He even had Sam, Puffy and Michelle swear to never mention his presence in any of their own correspondence with the SMP. He never gave them a reason. He didn't even have one in the first place.

So there the stash sat, unused, until tonight.

Technoblade sat down at the desk and took off the crisp top sheet of the pile. He dipped the pen in the inkwell. After a moment of hesitation, he glided his hand over the page. He wrote the start of the letter out brashly, with a heavy heart.

Dear Ranboo,

Sam is dead.

At home, Ranboo still had trouble showing emotions. When he'd be smiling, he'd try to hide it. When he was clearly sad, he brushed it off. It was as if emotion had now become a synonym of weakness even outside the Vault's walls. No matter how much Tubbo tried to convince him of the contrary—attempting to ignore the hypocritical nature of his arguments—Ranboo was made of stone most of the time. It was like living with a statue, and even Michael had noticed.

One day, Tubbo came back from a small Snowchester affair that needed to be sorted out.

He found Ranboo in tears.

At first, it was hard to tell. The tall hybrid was hunched over the table, and there was a relative silence in the cabin.

Then, Tubbo lent a careful ear.

Ranboo's breathing, so often hidden by his scarf and his cloak, was audible, and it was heavy. It was made of rocks, scraping against each other, crashing, rolling and plummeting into his lungs. His shoulders were shaking beneath the heavy layers of armour and fabric draping his figure. His pointed ears were plastered against his head.

Tubbo stamped off the rest of the snow from his hooves and dropped his satchel beside the door. "Ranboo, what's wrong?"

Only then did he notice the letter crumpled in the hybrid's right fist.

Ranboo turned around, and Tubbo immediately rushed over with a cloth. Acid enderman tears ran down his face and over his cheeks, carving deep, searing trenches over the scars from so long ago. An absence of any show of emotion had let them heal, but the whiplash of their return had reopened them again. They were red and raw, pus swelling up his whole face.

He didn't say anything as Tubbo cleaned him up, at least for a long time.

Then—

"Sam's dead," Ranboo pushed out of a strained and raspy throat.

Tubbo froze. "What?"

"Sam's gone. He's gone, Tubbo, he's gone..."

He had been gone for years now, across several seas and multiple lands. He had given up a quaint existence in the SMP and had gained his own crown. He had built a new life. He had been gone for a while.

Just not gone like this.

Not *gone* gone.

Tubbo should have been sadder than he was with the broken news, but he couldn't muster it. He didn't know why.

Sam—his friend, his redstone buddy, the man who had been more of a father to him than his biological own had ever been, who *was* his father now through marriage—was dead.

And Tubbo couldn't cry. He could only question.

"What happened, who told you?"

Ranboo's gaze and mind were clearly elsewhere. He didn't answer. His hand clenched tighter around the paper. Tubbo reached for it.

"Let me see—"

"No!"

Ranboo clutched the letter to his chest, as fierce as a child with a toy, with candy he didn't want to share. Tubbo, startled, drew back.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because— because..."

He burst into tears again. All thoughts of getting his hands on the letter flew away from Tubbo's mind. He crouched down beside the hybrid and wrapped his arms around him.

It felt... strange, now. Unnatural, as if he should be hugging him anymore. His arms couldn't find the right position that was once so loving and comfortable for them both. Every shift unbalanced one of them, or both. Tubbo felt Ranboo's cold armour more than he did his love and heartbeat.

"He's gone, Tubbo..."

Tubbo spared a thought for his mother throughout all this. It was a small one, and yet it still stabbed him in the gut.

He felt Ranboo shift, almost in a sudden change of tone. "I need to get back to the Vault."

The Vault.

Something clicked.

Something important.

"Absolutely not," he blurted out before he could stop himself.

Tubbo held on, even as Ranboo staggered to his feet and steadied himself on the edge of the table.

"I need to go," he mumbled through tears and the remains of a poor, abused throat. "I've left it too long. Sam wouldn't have left it unguarded, Sam would be there now, he'd... he'd..."

He collapsed again, and the ram held him tight. Tight, insistent, unwilling to let him go no matter what. He'd fight for this, with a grip and determination as strong as netherite.

He was fighting for the wrong reasons.

Ranboo could only fold. He sank into his grasp and wailed again, once more lamenting failures and burdens he never should have had to bear in the first place.

Tubbo reassured himself with the thought that this was for everyone's good.

"Ranboo, it's alright," he shushed him. "You can take one day off. This is for you, this is in honour of the prison's creator, and a friend. You can take a moment to grieve. I know how close you were with him..."

It took a lot of persuading and reassurance, but eventually Ranboo capitulated entirely. Tubbo doubted he had the energy to fight anymore, let alone walk to his bed. He had to be carried there, the ram tucked under his arm like a crutch. Tubbo helped him dispose of his armour and heavy cape. He laid his harpoon against the wall. He gave him tissues, a candle, and tucked him in tightly.

Ranboo looked so small, curled up in a fetus position with his tail tucked in deep against his belly. He shook like a leaf and every kiss and cuddle pulled out an agonized wail.

The last time he had been like this, it was in the hours that followed Tommy's death. Same kind of heartbreaking tragedy, same reaction.

And just like with Tommy's death, the ram could do nothing but be the strong one out of them both.

Tubbo deserved the greatest of the gods' punishments for what he did next. Only a stone cold heart and an evil mind could have done what he did next with no moral qualms. Only the most uncaring could take advantage of a family tragedy and the grief-stricken fragility of a loved one and use them as means to an end.

Tubbo wasn't evil. He had simply learned that life grinding to a stop because of a death was a useless way to go about things. It wouldn't reverse Time, and it wouldn't revive anyone. Sam was dead, and there was nothing he could do, except use the distraction to save someone else from the Lady's cold, clawed grasp.

Once Tubbo was certain Ranboo was too far gone to be aware of the world outside his bed and his sobs, he approached the nightstand.

Tubbo took the keys to Pandora's Vault.

He left as quietly as he could.

He headed straight to the SMP's forest, and knocked on the rickety treehouse door. His friend answered.

"Aimsey, we have one chance to do this."

He held up the keys. Her eyes grew wider.

"How did you—"

"It doesn't matter. We have one chance to do this," he repeated firmly. "Are you in?"

The same hesitation that had been hammered into their friendship for two years resurfaced. Aimsey's face was frozen, but a whole storm of thoughts raged behind her eyes. Normally, she'd turn away or dodge the question.

Today, she nodded.

Dream's break-out had been a grandiose event. Rebels of the SMP were banging on the walls of the prison, lava flowed abundantly and sank into the ocean, salty waves rose up and swallowed poor unfortunate souls caught too

close to its current or miserably scrambling aboard rickety wooden boats, bullets and cannonballs crashed against stones, barricades and heads, smoke clogged the sky and blood watered the coastline. The masked nightmare had emerged from the Nether portal with all the blood-curdling trimmings of a horrific apparition, from the frozen smile on his mask to the trident in his hand, still dripping with blood. Everyone had scattered. Everyone had screamed.

This one was nothing like it.

The sky was clear and blue, the warmth of a deceptively peaceful and sunny day blanketing the lands of the SMP. Hannah swept the doorstep of the bakery and greeted them both happily as they passed by. Bad stopped them on the edge of the Badlands for a pleasant chat and gave them each a muffin. Neighbors got into teasing arguments. Merchants tried to sell their wares by screaming at anyone unfortunate enough to be within earshot. Children chased butterflies across the Prime Path with raucous shrieks and flailing arms.

Everything was normal.

Too normal for what they were both about to do.

The keys were heavy in Tubbo's hands, heavier than anything he had ever held. His sweat made the ring slip and slide, and metal strips crashed against each other in a chilling symphony. His hooves stomped ominously against the ground, louder than they should have been. His breath hitched and trembled.

Aimsey on the other hand barely let out a single sound. Her footsteps were velveteen, her anxiety subdued by the noiseless twitching of her ears and cotton-tail, and her gasps bottled up deep inside her.

Tubbo had to turn around routinely to check she was still following, as paranoid as Orpheus was with Eurydice. This time, however, they were not escaping the Underworld: they were heading right into its heart.

The rushing waters inside the prison tore at his ears. The salt lashed at his senses, gripping them in a stinking chokehold and refusing to let go. He refused to go back. The obsidian seemed to close in around them as they ventured deeper. How Ranboo had managed to spend much more than a few simple hours patrolling the halls was a mystery.

One of Sam's deaths had triggered the first break-out: it was almost poetic that it came full circle for the second one.

The moment they pulled down the curtain of water and road the bridge across the chasm to the main cell, Aimsey threw herself into Eryn's arms.

He could barely hug her back, shock and exhaustion numbing every move. "Aims...?"

"I missed you..."

One of his hands—stiff and calloused, looking like it belonged to someone centuries older than he was—lightly rested on the back of her head. He pulled her closer and closed his eyes. Deep bags dug trenches beneath them. His frame was skeletal, and his clothes hung limply. They stank of salt and humid mold, making Tubbo wonder if he had ever cleaned in the two years he had been imprisoned here. The knees of his trousers were shredded, and bruises and scraped littered his kneecaps from the rough obsidian floor.

"What have they done to you?" Aimsey took his face between her hands.

He shrugged. "Nothing."

Nothing, not even the bare minimum to look after him properly.

The fireborn was shivering, as weak as an ember, and Tubbo gave him his coat.

"Everything's open and unlocked," he said, ushering them to the moving bridge. "Take your things and go. I've given Aimsey a map to a safe spot you can both rebuild a life in."

"But what about Ran—"

"Go."

Ranboo was Tubbo's problem, and Tubbo's problem alone.

A pair of warm hands grabbed his own. Warm, not as hot as they should have been. They had gotten there just in time.

Tubbo looked up. Eryn bowed his forehead into them. "Thank you," he mumbled.

Tubbo felt nothing; no joy, no anger. All he could say was; "Go, now."

He barely remembered them leave. He barely remembered their footsteps running down the corridors. He barely remembered hearing the gears churn

as doors were pushed open. He barely remembered the sounds of chests as they got Eryn's things and prepared to make a run for it.

He barely remembered closing the Vault down again, pulling all the security measures back into place, turning every lock, hearing every gear creak and stutter to a halt. He barely remembered walking out into the sunlight. He barely remembered entering back into the world at all.

He held his silence. He carried his head level. He held the keys to Pandora's Vault in this fist. He could barely look at anything, at anyone. His insides were screaming.

Screaming for what?

Guilt?

Retribution?

Victory?

He had no idea.

His only consolation was that he didn't see Eryn or Aimsey on the way. They had listened to him.

He turned off abruptly from the Prime Path and crossed the L'Manberg wasteland. He ignored the miners and fishermen going to exploit the depths of the crater who greeted him as he passed. He cared not for the sun beating down on his head, so harsh it felt like a punishment.

He knelt by Tommy's grave. The headstone still hadn't been fixed. Tubbo's hand landed on the jagged edge and sighed.

"I've done it, Tommy," he whispered to the wind. "I've finally fucked everything up. I hope our trio's legacy is a strong one, because I've just gone and fucked it all up, right up to the moon!"

He tipped his head back, and he laughed. He laughed until he cried. He cried until he collapsed on top of the burial ground. He stayed there until the sun began to set.

He went back to Snowchester. He opened the door. He walked in. He faced what he had done, the one thing he never thought he would have to.

Ranboo was already waiting.

"Tubbo, where are the keys?"

The ram didn't answer.

Ranboo swallowed hard. He asked again.

The ram didn't answer.

Every single sneaking snippet of suspicion coursed back through his veins and into his body and mind. It was the confirmation he prayed he'd never get.

When he had woken up after a troubled sleep, images of Sam's gored body and the sudden shock of Technoblade's signature puncturing every part of his being, he had instinctively reached for them. He never kept them far, always on his hip or on his bedside table.

He thought he did.

His first thought had been that he had forgotten, as he tended to do. He searched with urgency, but without too much fear. But then he remembered that thanks to his strict physical and mental exertions in the prison, he never forgot anything anymore. Even the most menial of tasks had been engraved deep into his mind. Ignorance bled into panic, and he searched more frantically. He turned the entire cabin inside out. He risked the inhabitants of Snowchester seeing him broken down and grief-stricken as he plowed through the crisp white streets, digging through every drift and in every sizable crack in the cobbles.

He looked everywhere. His mind spawned every theory, no matter how elaborate or ridiculous it sounded.

When Tubbo walked in, there was a flash of lightning in the darkness. At that moment, everything had become clear. Ranboo knew.

He didn't even have to look at what he held so obviously. The ram's mere presence had sparked a realization.

And what a realization it was.

Tubbo's hooves dragged against the wooden floor. He walked past Ranboo and to the table. He put down the keys. They knocked against the wood, a sharp *thunk!* that echoed in the silence.

Ranboo couldn't breathe.

He couldn't say anything. He could barely move. All that he could do was what he had trained his body to do for the past two years and a half.

He took his weapon, and he slid it under Tubbo's throat.

"What did you do?" he asked.

He knew his voice was colder than anything—colder than the tundra, colder than his harpoon's blade, colder than the shoulder Tubbo gave him. The ram's eyes were turned to the distance. They weren't even begging, they weren't even scared in the slightest.

"The right thing," he replied.

Ranboo dug the tip of his harpoon deeper into his skin. He knew what Tubbo had done but he wanted to hear it.

"What did you do?"

This time, Tubbo said nothing.

Ranboo pressed both his words and his weapon deeper. "What did you do?"

Finally, Tubbo spared him a glance. Ranboo could not tell if his eyes were full of disappointment, or pure unaltered hatred.

"I did what we should have done a long time ago," he said. "I have done what Sam would have done, what you would have done if any scrap of the enderman I once loved was still in you. I have done what would make the world a better place. I have done what is right, I have righted your mistake."

Ranboo dropped his weapon. Neither of them made a move to pick it up.

If he took a step, he would collapse. He knew he would, and he *couldn't* collapse. Not in front of Tubbo. Normally, he would avoid doing so out of worry. Today he did so out of dignity and pure anger. If he collapsed, he'd take Tubbo down with him. If he took him down with him, instincts might very well push him to rip out his throat with all the animalistic messiness of a raging beast.

"I have done what is right," he pushed out through gritted teeth. "I've done what I had to do to avenge Sapnap. He died because of that monster I kept locked up. I saved his legacy. I saved Karl the pain of seeing his husband's

murderer walk freely in the streets. I saved the SMP from going through what happened with Dream—"

"You just don't get it, do you?" Tubbo cut him off. His voice had an edge, like a double-edged sword. It sounded almost mocking, a disbelieving scoff leaving him. "You're the one *repeating* history, Ranboo, you're not saving it. You're making it worse. Dream was imprisoned because he was evil, because he had massacred entire nations, because he was a monster and he deserved it. Eryn did not deserve it. He killed because he had to, he had a very good reason, and it's a reason Tommy would have understood. You could have done anything else, you could have exiled him. Everyone could have exiled him, but instead, you all went running back to the prison. The prison, of all places! The one area everyone has agreed would be used for good, now! We can't wipe away what happened there, but we tried! We created a safe haven for everyone, no matter their standing or their kingdom, if the need ever came to be! We could have made it last, and instead we bought it back. We brought everything back... Eryn was getting tortured in there! He lived in squalor, and you let him rot, Ranboo. You were the only spark of honest good still left during Dream's reign. Now he's gone, you've become him."

"No, stop it!"

"You're becoming Dream, Ranboo, with no cares or morals or—"

"Stop it!"

He lost himself. His first connected with something hard.

Tubbo fell to the floor. He rubbed his head and groaned. There would be a bruise. His nose began to bleed.

Ranboo immediately clutched his hands to his chest. He fiddled with his fingers, with the scars and the imperfections left there from years of torment.

Years of built up shards of that torment that finally came back to lash out.

He reached for Tubbo.

"Leave." The ram's eyes burned. "I never want to see you again."

"|—"

"Ever."

Ranboo recoiled. The order was clear, and it was unmistakable.

He picked up his things and left the cabin without a single glance backwards. He couldn't fight any longer. He wouldn't admit that a weight had been lifted off, far from it. Strain and pain had only been added on.

But when Ranboo set off the Vault's alarm, he couldn't help but let out a small sigh of relief.

Chapter Thirty-Three: What The King Left Behind

That alarm had caused a panic that hadn't been felt in years.

Those haunted sirens brought back waves upon waves of buried traumas and once overcome fears. Laughter in the streets turned to screams. Doors that had been open to all without worry were now barricaded shut again. Every nation who heard it sent an armed battalion to the prison's defense.

When they got there, they found the complex open, and Ranboo hunched over in one of the halls. He was clutching a minor wound to his side, his harpoon lying off to the side.

He explained that just like the last prison break, the prisoner had somehow managed to overpower him and make his escape. He made up a last minute excuse, something vague about the prisoner secretly being affiliated with a foreign enemy nation no one knew about. They must have staged a silent coup on the prison and broken him out.

He was soon taken out and patched up. Ranboo was relieved no one touched his life markings as they did. The ink still hadn't dried on the second heart.

A manhunt ensued as everyone scrambled around the SMP, trying to pick up Eryn's trail. They wouldn't find him. Tubbo was always meticulous with plans like these. They were all wasting their time, so when Ranboo was probed for information, he gave none. He stuck with his story of foreign espionage, and that was as far as anyone got with him.

The searches were eventually dropped when no clues or sightings resurfaced, although everyone still remained on high alert, somewhere in the back of their minds.

Something else that had also been dropped along with the searches had been Ranboo.

No one openly feared him anymore, but no one ever approached him as a friend either. He was just there, now. He existed, melted into the crowds of the SMP. He was no longer put on a pedestal in any way.

He was left completely and utterly alone.

Ranboo had nowhere to go. By striving for Pandora's Vault's safety, he had left everything behind—everything, from compassion to friends. It would be a hard fight to get them all back again.

He couldn't go to Niki, not yet at least. He couldn't bear to see the pain on her face. That cookie she promised would be waiting in the oven for a long while yet.

He couldn't go to Tubbo. It was done. That was it, they were finished. He tried not to think about it.

He couldn't even go to Techno, because that cowardly bastard hadn't even answered his letters. He had left them to think he was dead and then resurfaced only in ink to bear tragic news that had torn Ranboo apart. That piglin couldn't even man up and explain himself! One letter, that was all Ranboo had gotten from him. Once again, he was gone. Techno would never talk to him again.

In his anger, Ranboo only had one thing to say to that: *fine*.

He couldn't even write to Sam anymore, for... reasons he didn't want to think about either.

There was only one option.

Ranboo never remembered the Greater SMP's palace being so small, nor so airy. He felt like he could walk from the portcullis to the keep in only a few strides. It was nothing like the long, tedious marches through the prison's halls. Now Ranboo could actually breathe something other than brine, and his lungs thanked him for it.

It felt... wrong. Walking back into the castle like old times felt *wrong*. He felt like he didn't belong here anymore.

The guards begged to differ, as did the palace staff he passed. They all greeted him the same way they had years ago. He thought they did. He

forgot exactly, but their respect stirred something deep within him, a part of him he had tried to lock away when he first set foot inside the Vault.

It still didn't stop the heavy weights on his shoulders from dragging him down. His steps were heavy, hesitant. They sank into the ground and tried to pull him down with them. They tried to bury him alive. As much as he wanted them to, he barely had any energy—let alone control over his own body—to follow them. He trudged on, thoughtless.

One moment, he was outside. The next, he was pushing open the large, varnished doors of the throne room.

King Eret put down his book. "Ranboo? My gods, is that you?"

The monarch hadn't changed: he was still so regal, still so fashionable in his clothes and mannerisms, and still so kind in his tone.

The hybrid bowed. "Your Majesty..."

He couldn't get himself to rise. He wanted to collapse to the floor and stay there until he rotted away.

Eret had other plans.

Fast footsteps rushed towards him, and Ranboo was raised by two hands. Those same hands came up to caress his cheeks and smooth back the scarred skin of his face. Concerned, pale eyes bore into his. They too were unchanged.

Tubbo used to look at Ranboo like that, with so much soul and care.

So did Techno.

And Niki.

And Sapnap.

And Sam.

And—

"When they told me you lost a life in the struggle, I was so worried," Eret said, smoothing back the fluffy fringe falling in front of Ranboo's eyes. "I didn't know how many you had left. I thought I'd never see you again, that History would repeat itself and you'd die in there alone, and—"

"I lied."

Two words, and yet they were the hardest ones Ranboo ever had to push out.

Eret pulled away a little, startled. Ranboo's stomach heaved, his insides turning into cement.

Eret tentatively took Ranboo's hand.

He let him.

Eret rolled up his sleeve.

He let him do that too.

The monarch rubbed at the second heart, slashed through. The pad of his thumb was warm, and before long the ink was smudged. It was all off before they knew it, revealing an intact marking.

Eret stared at it. His chest heaved.

"Ranboo, there were no foreign invaders, were there?"

The hybrid hung his head.

"What really happened?"

He couldn't say even if he wanted to. He didn't know for sure.

"Are you trying to protect someone?"

It hurt to shake his head and deny what his friend already knew. He nodded.

"Who?" When Ranboo didn't answer, Eret tried again. "Who are you protecting?"

Ranboo tried, but he couldn't say a word. That singular, frayed little string of loyalty and love that still binded him to Tubbo stopped him. It wound around his throat and choked him to silence.

Not even Eret's insistant concern could cut it away, even if he tried.

And oh, he did try, but every attempt fell on deaf, remorseful ears.

"Can things just go back to the way they were before?" Ranboo suddenly asked, his voice shaking. He dropped the prison's keys at Eret's feet. "I don't want to go through this anymore."

The grief. That strange sense of loss he couldn't explain. He felt it everywhere. It burned deeper than any acid tears ever could.

But the tears still hurt nonetheless.

He dropped to the monarch's feet with a wail, a cry of a wounded animal. He curled up on himself as if someone had hit him down themselves.

As if it had been him shoved down mercilessly on the cabin floor, and not Tubbo.

"I've lost him, Eret," Ranboo sobbed, pressing a clawed hand to his face. He wanted to tear himself apart entirely. "I've lost him for good..."

The monarch could do nothing but hug him tight.

The two months that followed the funeral were some of the hardest Technoblade ever had to live through.

First off, there was Ranboo. Letters upon letters had reached him at record speed and had claimed the exhausted little hearts of two different messenger birds—Brian excluded, because the poor sod hardly ever did anything nowadays and preferred to roost in Techno's room.

His old student—his old friend—begged him with lines upon lines of manic scrawls to explain himself, to write back, to say anything to him. He wanted proof he wasn't imagining things, that Techno was alive.

Technoblade ignored each and every one.

He ignored a lot of things nowadays. He no longer responded to greetings or overdue condolences, invites or needs for advice.

He had one priority then and there.

It used to be two, but Michelle had made it clear she didn't need him constantly watching over her shoulder. Her blade and a straw dummy was enough for her, and the occasional soft words of her vulpine mentor who continued to teach her despite a bludgeoned, grey attitude of his own.

No one dared approach Puffy, both out of respect and fear. A grieving monarch could be a dangerous monarch, the court whispered, they themselves bundled up in dark clothes of mourning and huddling in the shadows.

The halls were empty most of the time now, and for once Techno wished they weren't.

As his legends had said, he had torn down kingdoms. He had impeached monarchs that did not deserve the crown and the power they were given. He had dismissed entire courts. He had slaughtered entire courts, too. He would then spend days walking through the empty corridors of the palaces he conquered. Sometimes, if the monarch had decided to go calmly, they would be intact. Other times, they would be crumbling, scarred with remains of fire, brick and mortar. They would even be speckled with blood.

The South's halls were as empty as if the monarch had gone peacefully. Techno knew the truth. It was none of the sort.

Sam hadn't gone peacefully; he had gone down fighting in a stupid part of a plan that was doomed to fail, part of a scheme to kill Techno and Puffy, not him. He had succumbed to a trap not even laid for *him*. Sam had gone down in a blaze no one had seen coming. He died alone, and in pain.

The King had *not* gone quietly. The halls didn't reflect that. Technoblade prayed that one day they would be bustling again, bursting with fine fabrics and jewels that would make him sick, that nobles would dance merrily, would talk and chatter with laughter scattered in-between; he couldn't bear the silence.

And most of all he wished he would see Puffy walk gaily down them once more.

Most days, she was a shadow of herself, a silent phantom cloaked in black and haunting the royal apartments. There were times now where the piglin couldn't tell who between the King and Queen was really dead.

She never went out into the gardens anymore. She never visited the city. She never even glanced the beach or the coastline. She seemed shackled to the palace, to its vast rooms and painted gilding, although she clearly appreciated none of it.

She was Techno's main priority. He would stand by her when no one else would.

The only times she was properly seen in public after Sam's funeral was in the cabinet meetings. Someone still had to do them. Things still had to work. The long pause between Sylvee's death and Sam's coronation had been a devastating blow to the South: no one was going to let it happen again, no matter how beloved the King was or how unexpected and sudden his departure had been.

Techno still stayed by her side. He wouldn't leave. He wouldn't forsake her as many others did.

She sat at the head of the council's table, head propped up on her balled up fist and staring out of the window. She was a hollow wreck.

It was hard for anyone to draw their eyes from her, although they all desperately wanted to. It made sense why she was rarely seen anymore, but it was concerning.

That fact, along with a lot of other things, worried the cabinet. Because of course it did, but not in the way Technoblade thought it should.

In moments like this, Puffy's grief was brushed aside in favour of more "important" concerns.

"Strictly speaking, the Queen has no blood ties to the throne."

They talked about her with a harsh tone, as if she was a diplomatic problem meant to be solved instead of a living, breathing person currently in their presence. Technoblade didn't care about the notion of titles and ranks, but he did have a grudge against dehumanisation.

The fur on his back bristled. "She married the King," he pointed out.

"Well, yes, but now she's a widow our enemies might see her as bearing an unrighteous claim."

"By that logic, the late Queen Sylvee would have been in far more danger than she actually was."

"There was a difference. She came from a noble lineage. Her present Majesty, I'm sorry to say, does not. Rumours about her days on the sea are starting to re-emerge beyond our borders. Many consider her a pirate and a thief, and whether those claims are true or not, having her sit alone on the throne with no direct ties to nobility and no eligible heir could be grounds for war, civil or otherwise."

"Unless she marries again, to someone with a powerful stance and reputation, both in the South and beyond," another advisor jumped in.

Technoblade's blood ran cold.

Everyone was looking at him.

"No."

Boomer weakly tried to reason with him, "Techno—"

"No!"

He angrily pushed himself out of his chair. The whole room shook. Puffy, still silent and frozen, undoubtedly a complete stranger to the suggested plan, screwed her eyes shut. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

"This is the Queen we're talking about, and the throne. If we leave her alone —"

"She'll never be alone, and I don't need to pretend to steal a heart that doesn't belong to me to prove it!"

"But—"

"A month's barely gone by and you're already trying to replace Sam with the first person you lay your eyes on!"

"It's a matter of political—"

"This isn't about *politics*! If it was, you'd know full well that Puffy is more than capable enough to make her own choices and decisions. She is more than strong enough to defend her place and honour, and she doesn't need to be tied to anyone to prove that. This is a matter of the heart. I knew the two of them years ago, and I was there when their love was blooming. I saw it get stronger and stronger, and even now it is still as powerful as ever. You are asking a shattered partner to forget their soulmate and move on, just like that. How *dare* you. How dare you all."

He stormed out. The palace shook with his fury and disgust, resonating somberly with every indignant huff and growl.

However, that wasn't to say that he didn't think about it a little.

In fact, he thought about it a lot.

"I would do it if it was required to protect you," he finally decided.

He blurted it out during one of their walks together around the painted courtyard that same afternoon. Its importance had seemed to skyrocket in recent times, especially regarding the late King's family. The murals were their escape. They sent them back to a time of war and bloodshed, sure, but also one filled with a sense of hope and friendship they had rarely felt since.

It was one of the only times Technoblade ever got to see Puffy go outside, and one of the only times she showed him she knew he was there. They exchanged no words, and rarely any glances, but Puffy would stick to his side like glue and hug his arm tightly. Sometimes, they would sit on the fountain's ledge, and Technoblade would hold her.

Many a time, he was certain he'd shatter and grind her up in his embrace. It felt like she wanted him to.

But today, she didn't touch him. She stayed a foot over to the side, as if he didn't even exist. He put it down to the events of the cabinet meeting.

How wrong he soon found out he was.

As of now, the marriage suggestion was all that occupied his mind. It was a difficult topic to explore and solve.

He had seen her taking herbal heat suppressants, something that no animal hybrid did unless there was a good reason. She was not intending to let anyone take her hand or her love ever again. She wasn't even giving anyone a chance to try.

Technoblade understood that, and he respected it.

"I will never ask you to give me your heart. I won't pretend to be someone I'm not. It'll be in title only, nothing more."

The thought of being called a king revolted him to his core, but leaving a good friend to wallow alone in danger and grief even more so.

Then he recalled a more distasteful side of the duty he had perhaps voluntarily overlooked. His eye twitched. He finally decided to just spit it out, for both their sakes.

"And everyone is desperate for a royal heir, now," he muttered. "So, there's that too..."

The whole thing felt like violation of everything each of them held dear. Puffy was like—well, not a sister exactly, but someone close to it. Close enough to make all of this feel inherently wrong.

He felt Puffy bristle beside him. "Sam and I already have an heir."

"Michelle took herself out of the inheritance line."

It had been a sudden decision originally refused by her father, but accepted and acted on anyway now he was gone. It would have been seen as the highest mark of disrespect for the dead, if Michelle wasn't clearly haunted and terrified every time she tried to approach her father's now vacant throne, or any time any mention of succession was made in regards to her royal title.

Her mother and her uncle had encouraged her to when she came crying to them. They wouldn't let anyone suffer more than they had to. The princess became a young trainee in the guard, and something shifted. There was a glimmer there, however faint it was.

Somewhere down the line, Technoblade had been certain they had all made the right choice there.

The piglin tilted his head. "Are you going to reinstate her?"

Then, Puffy said something he didn't expect. Not in the slightest.

"It's not her."

Puffy's voice was tight and raspy, as if she had completely worn her throat out with screams and sobs, and yet Techno hadn't seen or heard her do so.

Her hand ghosted over her stomach, a featherlight, trembling stroke so light and quick that he almost missed it.

Almost.

A single, absent-minded caress was all it took to shatter everything.

Technoblade stopped in his tracks.

Wide eyes searched for a proper answer. He had one—one that was indisputable—but gods it was painful. He didn't like it, he wished he didn't have it.

Puffy wasn't looking at him. She didn't say anything else. She quickened her pace and made to walk off, but the piglin was swifter. He grabbed her shoulder.

"How?" was all he managed to say.

She spun back, eyes suddenly blazing. "You know full well. How else do you think these things happen? This isn't one of your Greek legends, Techno. Things like this don't just *happen* without a reason."

He wished they did. It was awful of him to think so, but he did. It would have dulled a lot of pain.

Her silence spoke volumes. He closed his eyes.

He had never sworn before.

His first was silent.

Fuck.

"Puffy—"

"Don't." She stepped away from him, avoiding his gaze. "It's hard enough as it is."

That night, there were two different arguments afoot, both angrily addressed to the dead. Both were one-sided.

The first was Technoblade, who found a secluded spot in the gardens and tried to tap into the direct, otherworldly line to complain to a manager. The manager in question being Philza.

"Look I don't know what game you and your Lady friend are playing, but you knew, didn't you? You knew this was going to happen and you decided to take him anyway!"

Thank the gods—or not, because right now he hated their perfect little guts—for the seclusion. He would have been incarcerated and branded as mad if anyone saw him angrily screaming at the heavens the way he was.

No one answered his calls, living or dead.

"Is that why you got me to get over my grief, why you led me here? So I could finally pay for overdue sins, so I could find mortal pain again? Was this to punish me for all I've done? Is this a damnation, not just for me, but for everyone in this place?"

Only the leaves shivered at his tone. Nothing else seemed fazed.

"If this is your way of punishing me, so be it. I don't care about what you want to do to me, but leave Puffy out of this. She doesn't deserve it, this or anything else you've thrown at her over the years. She is the one person who's been through so much that she simply *doesn't* deserve, all while monsters like me get to live a high life. Where's the justice in that? There is *none*."

Philza did not come back to confirm or deny his accusations.

Techno scoffed. "You're too cowardly and obedient to your wife's rules to even come back and answer me, you chicken!"

It was pointless. When the gods or the dead didn't want to listen, they wouldn't. They had turned countless blind eyes as mortals shrieked up for their mercy. Why would tonight be any different?

"Find, be like that, but I swear on my soul, I will protect this child with my last life," he vowed, growling. "I won't let you lay a single finger on them."

It would be easier said than done, with the temperamental nature of the world and the divine species that guarded it, but this was nothing new. He had fought the impossible thousands of times before.

He'd happily step up to the challenge again.

The second was in the palace, in the darkness of the royal chambers.

Puffy lay shivering on top of the blankets draped across the bed, her face steaming with tears and buried into a pillow that still smelled faintly of gunpowder. The scent, despite it being strong, had started to fade in the two months since. Soon, she wouldn't be able to pretend anymore. She wouldn't be able to convince her tired, grief-stricken mind that Sam was still there, holding her against him.

She felt something start to coil around her heart, slowly suffocating the few sparks that still made it dimly glow. She raised her head with difficulty, feeling it throb from the heavy crying and pure and utter exhaustion that had

started to drain all her energy in recent times. Tina had been so worried—and undoubtedly still haunted by the fate of the last queen—that she had sent for a physician.

Puffy wasn't as shocked by the news as perhaps everyone would have expected her to be. She had known before they all did. She didn't need a doctor to perform a check-up.

Deep, deep down, she had already known.

The coil tightened. Sam's memory did too, choking her painfully.

She wanted to erase him from her mind forever. Even so, when she tried to strip everything away, her deep love still remained. Love always found a way, no matter how often she tried to shut it out for good.

It wasn't the same, though.

This affection was stranger, more painful.

It was a passion more furious than any hate, yet still so agonizingly similar. It was a love that gnarled and rotted too easily, and a hate that bloomed with tender, soft flowers at every turn.

An argument was too generous a word for what it was. It was a one-sided curse, poison dripping from a place no one had ever believed it would ever come from. It was from the last place everyone would have expected those words to spew, and yet they did anyway.

"I hate you," she pushed out to the quiet and to any phantoms who lingered, if at all. "I hate you..."

The prince was born a few months later, in the middle of a thunderstorm.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Sixteen Years

The whole event was, for lack of a better word, an ordeal. The rumbling thunder and cracks of dry lightning were surpassed by the screams of pain and anguish, floating through the castle halls like the shrieks of a ghost.

Techno had pleaded and even physically threatened the physicians to let him into the bedchambers, to be by Puffy's side as she cried—delirious out of her mind, they said—for Sam. Every call broke his heart and he used them to his advantage, but the healers would still have none of it.

"The only one allowed in is the King," one particularly frustrated physician huffed.

"Yeah, well he's too busy in the afterlife," Techno lashed back, as if they didn't already know. "I am the closest thing to him and if you don't let me see the Queen, I'll break down the door!"

He wouldn't, though. The night was just as hectic as it was, and forcing his way into the royal chambers would only add to everyone's stress.

Techno instead resorted to pacing relentlessly outside, flinching at every cry, swallowing down a sob of his own with every desperate shout of Sam's name, and bristling at every minor whisper of a potential complication.

In the end, it was Michelle who finally managed to calm him down somewhat, talking to him to get his mind off everything. She messily tried to recount a Greek myth he had told her long ago, missing out important details and mixing up names, but still trying. He couldn't concentrate on a word she was saying, however, as she too was shaking and looked close to breaking down. She was nevertheless still acting more like an adult than he was.

At one point, with tears in her eyes, she cut herself off mid-sentence and asked him; "She's going to make it, right? She's not going to die. She can't die. I can't lose her too..."

Technoblade didn't know any more than she did.

They were a mess: two piglins huddled together on the polished floor of a palace corridor, hanging their heads and silently praying for a miracle. Everyone was, from the soldiers standing guard at the end of the hallways to the poor, frightened maids that rushed in and out with bowls of water and anything else the healers asked for.

Eventually, a loud cry broke through the storm, and everyone perked up. It wasn't a scream of agony, or even of lovesick despair, but one of life.

Life.

Life was such a foreign concept to the kingdom in recent times.

That single, high pitched scream brightened the palace and all the hearts in it. It even appeared to mellow the gods' moods, and the violent tempest that shook the skies gave way to a light rainfall that drummed pleasantly against the window panes.

Finally, they were allowed in, and both piglins immediately made beelines for very different people.

Michelle ran straight to her mother's bedside and held her hand, whispering affirmations and words of comfort into her exhausted ears and pressing kisses to her eerily white face.

Technoblade, on the other hand, approached the child first. He couldn't help himself. He just had to know how painful the next stage of his life would be.

When he first glimpsed the prince, cradled in the crook of a healer's arms, the piglin didn't know exactly what he was expecting. He was so very small and unbelievably wrinkled. He didn't look like a son, least of all a royal one. He was nothing but a hairless creature with a fierce, squealing roar.

And for a second, he let his worry rest.

Maybe the pain wouldn't come yet. The gods were being kind. Maybe he would stay a small, dried fruit forever. Techno could live with that.

"Techno," called a strained voice.

A weakened hand reached towards him from the bed. In a flash, he was by her side.

She was glowing, in the wrong way, pale and livid. He cupped her cheek and roughly smoothed his thumb across her skin, desperate to give her some colour back.

"I'm here."

"Where's Sam?"

Sweat still pooled on her forehead and trickled down her neck, her eyes half-lidded and a hopeful smile on her face that seemed to have forgotten the past strife.

Technoblade felt his heart tighten. "He's around," he replied, immediately changing the subject soon after. "You alright?"

She nodded. Weakly, but at least she nodded.

He did the only thing he could, which was give her a kiss on her forehead. He wasn't usually one for that kind of affection, but it was better than lying to her face.

The boy was named Tristan.

Technoblade liked to believe that it came from a brave and noble knight of the Round Table. That's what he told people, and the boy himself as he grew up. It wasn't entirely a lie, although the piglin had slightly embellished the truth. Although the prince shared a name with a legend, it meant something so much sadder.

Technoblade would never forget the clear, sunny morning after the night of ragged despair and turmoil, where the golden rays filtered through the window and everything seemed deceptively peaceful. He had stood guard over the Queen and the newborn all night, even when the healers and maids retired. Now, as morning broke, Puffy was finally holding her son in her arms for the first time. It was only her, the prince and Techno in the room.

He watched on as she showered her son with love and he had to admit, although having children of his own never appealed, the scene warmed his heart.

"He's kind of cute," he chuckled softly. He was crouched down by the Queen's bedside, his head resting in the crook of his arm. He reached out one of his trotters for the baby to grab. The prince had a strong grip, even after only a few hours of being born. He'd make a fine swordsman one day. "What are you going to name him?"

To his surprise, Puffy's reply had slipped out quickly, like a gushing stream. "Tristan," she whispered without another thought.

Her voice broke as she did. All the half-conscious confusion from the past night had disappeared, and reality had since sunk in again. There was no more blissful delirium to bask in.

"Tristan, like the knight?" Technoblade ventured.

She didn't say anything for a while, instead choosing to focus her attention and rising emotions into coddling her son.

Then, "If that's what you want to believe, then yes."

It had taken Technoblade a day or two to finally figure out what she meant by that. It took even longer to stop the painful jab that threatened to tear his heart in two.

Tristan, he learned, was a beautiful and noble name pieced together from sadness and dark melancholy. It didn't take much to know why his mother had chosen it.

He was a child born deep in a time of unshakable despair and neverending mourning, forever a subtle reminder of the king, husband, father and friend they had all lost.

Poor, poor boy.

But Technoblade was right, the pain truly came a couple of years later, when the prince suddenly started to grow more familiar to his own eyes, as well as to his mind and to the voices that inhabited it.

He grew fast, or maybe time simply seemed swifter to an aging Technoblade. One moment, the prince was a small but noisy little thing cradled day and night to his mother's chest. The next he was toddling towards Techno and demanding piggyback rides.

Technoblade began to see more of Sam in him, from the fair golden brown shine of his curls reflected in the single portrait of his father's youth to the faint freckles rippling with mint and jade highlights over his cheeks when caught in the sun.

It was a semblance he had never managed to get when he lost Phil. He didn't know if that made it harder or easier to bear both losses.

He was a spirited young boy too—not as obnoxiously so and constant as Tommy had been, but close enough for Techno to lean into the familiarity. It was as if Tommy had been given another chance to grow properly instead of being flung into wars every five minutes; if Technoblade had actually made an effort to help the boy in more ways than simply being a powerful ally or a hideaway from Dream; if they had listened to each other instead of the bloodlust and violent drive. The piglin was ready to give it all another try.

He started by lowering his guard and opening up a little more.

He treated Tristan almost like his own son, keeping a constant and worried eye on him, playing when he demanded to, and melting at every puppy-eyed look he was given. He was pleasantly surprised—he was starting to get the hang of it all.

His first real blow came when Tristan was about five.

He came running up to Technoblade one day with an interesting leaf to show him, and a sudden question that froze the piglin to his core.

It was about the portrait being hung up in one of the hallways, one that had been long overdue and delayed for literal years between projects, creative burnout and long mourning periods. Tristan had watched the installation with unshakable fascination. He had recognized his mother in the picture, but not the man standing by her side. Perhaps vaguely he did, but his figure had blurred with all the other painted faces hung around the rest of the palace.

He knew nothing. No one had told him anything. No one would have dared to without explicit royal permission.

There was only one person in the South who didn't need it to do as he pleased.

Technoblade finally told the young prince everything.

He showed him Sam's tomb. He took him to the courtyard of murals where the prince liked to mindlessly play and run around, and told him all the stories depicted in full. He finally explained why his mother would sometimes softly cup his cheek, stare at him with glassy eyes and move away without a word, disappearing for hours on end—an occurrence which often left the prince crestfallen, asking Techno in a small voice if he had done something wrong. The number of times that the piglin had cradled the poor boy to a teary, troubled sleep was heartbreaking, even to him.

All the prince had done was listen intently and gaze in awe at each remaining fragment of his father Technoblade managed to pick out—and he picked out all of them. Every single last one, from written words to portraits, from buildings to more menial, handcrafted treasures.

That evening, Tristan ran up to his mother and gave her the biggest hug anyone had ever seen. Even Puffy herself was taken aback and stared at Techno for an answer.

All he replied with was: "He had the right to know."

It opened a long-locked door and after years of silence, Puffy finally spoke Sam's name again. A few more rays of sun brighten up the palace again.

Tristan had his mother's smile, and Technoblade was glad for it. Puffy rarely showed it anymore, and when she did it was always veiled by a stormy curtain no one could disperse.

She held herself up with a strong, rooted stance, cold eyes and an even colder tongue when she made decisions and gave out orders. She was not a tyrant, far from it. She was only a queen trying to hold her place, and she did so remarkably well.

The South became a powerful thalassocracy with an extensive commercial and military naval fleet, although the ambition was rooted in a search for distraction rather than actual need. It still nevertheless earned the Queen a hefty place in the kingdom's history books alongside her late husband's industrial revolution—hefty, and perhaps even greater.

Technoblade was right. She didn't need to be tied to anyone to prove her strength and worth.

Sometimes, it was as if she couldn't bear to be near her son; other times, more often than not, she couldn't bear them to be apart.

It would make for happier times, just as it would make for sadder ones. Those small moments could even be deceptive.

The one that immediately jumped out to Technoblade if anyone would ask was when the young prince had wanted to know about the three hearts lined up down the back of his neck, hidden from view by his curls.

"The first two come from your parents, because they love you very much," Puffy told him, tracing each one as she spoke. "The third one is given to us by the gods, because good things always come in threes."

"So Pa gave me one?"

Techno and Puffy shared a look. It was the piglin who answered.

"Suppose so," he shrugged.

"If I give it back, will he be alive again?"

It was an answer that required far more than a feigned disinterested and nonchalant shrug.

Puffy smoothed back her son's hair. "That's not how it works, sweetheart..."

Tristan turned around and faced his mother with a wide smile. "If we wish really hard, it can happen, right?"

His excitement made it seem like he had just solved all of the Universe's ailments. Technoblade found himself wishing he had.

Puffy tried to hide the frown slowly creeping onto her face. "Perhaps..."

Her son took her hand. "Let's wish, then."

And they did, for a good half an hour. All three of them.

One hand, however, scarred and shaking, squeezed Techno's harder than the other younger and softer one. He wished miracles actually existed.

Both the prince's parents had a dark side in one way or another, in both appearances and in history. Tristan was bright in more ways than one, like a star or angel. He was the perfect mix of their light, not their shadows. He was untainted, untouched and allowed to grow beautifully.

He was allowed to believe in happily ever afters, star-bound wishes and divine miracles, because he had no moral obligation to do otherwise. If he wanted to believe his father could come back to him, he'd believe it. No one could stop him.

To Technoblade's dismay, Tristan was perhaps not the warrior he had predicted him to be. Oh sure, he was decent enough with a sword, but it had taken him a good few years before he had even thought of picking one up in the first place. He was a poet rather than a fighter, preferring quills over blades whenever he was given the choice.

Specifically, the young prince found his little heaven in music. As he grew up, it was rare to see him without his shiny, honeywood guitar somewhere nearby, either on his back or in his hands as he plucked out a melody, tucked into secret crevices within the palace walls no one else paid much mind to.

Technoblade had once bestowed the name "Orpheus" on Wilbur—a superficial nickname needed for a time-sensitive and secret Syndicate meeting. He hadn't thought it out beyond the "musical man" similarity. It had done the job at the time, but now Wilbur was dead—and hadn't even known about the appellation in the first place—he probably wouldn't mind it being reassigned to someone with a more deserving comparison.

Tristan was a musical man—or rather a boy—with a guitar, yes, but there was more than that.

Fathered by a king and warrior and mothered by a queen the sappy court poets likened far more to a muse or nymph than a grounded being of flesh and blood, he was touched by Apollo. His music, more beautiful and sweet to the ear than any of the rowdy court musicians' sounded heaven-sent. His melodies could call back the warmer seasons, make flowers grow, animate stones and enchant animals. The whole world could stop and listen to him, and it often did.

Tristan could charm his way into and out of the Underworld, move the ruthless gods there to tears and reclaim any lost souls he wanted.

He was still, however, young and inexperienced enough to turn around and check if those same souls were following out of pure paranoia. His name, Tristan, almost seemed to destine him to some sort of tragedy down the line, too. He had a big heart, and that would make it an easy target for any malicious god to shoot at and pick apart.

He was too shy to sing for the most part, except to his mother. Techno had heard him too, one evening when he took a wrong turn down a corridor and found himself eavesdropping outside the prince's door.

Again, Technoblade would be damned if Apollo didn't have a hand in Tristan's artistic glory, and Hermes in his wit and jests.

Orpheus was a good nickname for the young prince. It only stuck more firmly the more the seasons passed and his talent grew.

In a single blink, Tristan turned sixteen. In that same blink, Technoblade realized how old he himself actually was.

Not felt—he had been complaining about his exhaustion and aching bones even before he left the SMP—but actually saw.

When he'd see himself in a mirror, he'd read his reflection like a book. Every scar told a story, and every wrinkle at the corner of his snout or near his eye too. His entire legend was transcribed on his person, and every grey tuft of fur he found never ceased to remind him of that.

Neither did Tristan.

"Hey, Grandpa."

"For the last time, kid, I'm your Uncle."

"Alright, Grand-Uncle."

Technoblade rolled his eyes. "You're impossible."

Tristan grinned, "And you're old."

Now Technoblade knew how Philza felt. That blasted avian would probably be hooting and squawking with laughter if he was watching them now. The piglin almost hoped he was. Maybe he'd be scoffing loud enough to break the veil and be heard after all these years of silence.

"I'll let you roast me when you find cleverer clapbacks," he said, ruffling the prince's hair.

"Hey! I brushed it this morning!" he complained, ducking away and trying to tousele it back into place. His long, shoulder length locks shone in the sunlight.

"Did you? It didn't look like it."

"I did!"

"So, what's this new trend, then? Bird nest chic?"

"Actually, it's aloof, styled in a way that it doesn't look like it's styled. You wouldn't get it."

"Ah, that's what it is, then."

Teenagers, huh.

Technoblade hummed to himself, amused, and rolled his eyes. He would have gotten away with it, except for one tiny detail he overlooked.

Tristan had been stuck to his side since he knew how to walk.

"I can see you."

"Princes don't lie, Tristan." He may have lost a few youthful skills over time, but his reflexes weren't one of them. He ducked swiftly out of the way as a guitar sailed towards his head. "Missed me."

"Shame." Tristan swung his instrument over his back and secured the strap over his shoulder. He then leapt onto the nearest garden wall and engaged in an agile show of balance. "So, what are we doing today?"

"We?"

"I'm here, too."

"You followed me. I never invited you."

"Same difference."

"What makes you think we're doing anything?"

The boy shrugged. "It just feels like a day where we ought to do something."

He wasn't wrong. The sky was clear, the air was warm without being stifling, and no official business was susceptible to ruining their free time.

"A walk sounds nice," the piglin decided.

"Isn't that what we're doing now?"

He inhaled the sweet air of the nearby flowerbeds. "Exactly," he sighed.

"I can work with that."

Tristan jumped off the wall and back beside Techno, jostling him slightly. The piglin retaliated with a good natured huff.

The boy latched himself around his arm. "You know I love you, Uncle."

Technoblade let out a joking, defeated sigh. "No, you don't. You called me old."

"Lots of people love old things."

"Like what?"

Tristan reeled them off on his fingers. "Relics, legends, past times— isn't that what nostalgia is all about?—antiquities, songs... The list goes on!

"Still, you don't love me."

"Why not?"

"If you loved me, you would make me happy and read 'The Art Of War'."

"Not this again..."

"Yes, this again."

"I'll read it for the philosophy when I feel like it," Tristan promised, "not for the military strategy."

"A king needs to have a good, battle-savvy mind."

"I'm not King yet."

"One day, you will be."

"One day, but not today." He dragged his hands over his guitar strings, plucking out a harmonious chord. "Today I'd like to be a kid with his guitar, walking with his favourite uncle."

"I'm your only uncle here."

"That doesn't mean I love you any less."

The piglin smiled.

There was a point where Technoblade had realized Tristan was not a sponge, eagerly lapping up all of his teachings like Michelle or Ranboo once had. He took note of some, but not others.

The perfect example came when they came across Tina tending to one of the flowerbeds. There was a quaint little game they often played with her, where she'd hold up a flower and he'd tell her what it meant. The differences between both Tristan and Techno's answers were drastic.

Today, it was a poppy flower.

"Hope and remembrance," Tristan said.

"Opium and sleeping drugs," Techno said in turn.

Tina shook her head and scoffed. "And that's another point to His Royal Highness the Crown Heir, Prince Tristan of the Southern Lands," she tutted, quite purposely dragging out the victor's royal title. "Honestly, Techno, it's like you're not even trying."

"Well forgive me for having a more practical outlook on botany than a poetic one," he grumbled in return.

"Poetry is nice," Tristan pointed out.

"There's no harm in having both," Tina said, plucking the poppy from Techno's hand. "Remind me to keep you away from the more 'practical' plants. Gods know what will happen if you decide to drug the whole palace into an eternal sleep."

"They'll already do that themselves with the amount of wine some of them drink."

"Techno, there is a royal child present. He doesn't need to be exposed to all that yet."

Tristan laughed. "Don't worry about me, I'm already well aware of all that."

"Are you, now?"

"Who are we to stop them from having fun? They're not doing much harm. Believe me, I know."

Tina put her hands on her hips. "Something tells me your mother doesn't know about that."

He laughed sheepishly. "She doesn't have to, does she?"

"Depends on how ready you are to do me a few favours..."

"I smell some blackmail going on here."

More footsteps came to join the party. They were almost as heavy as Technoblade's, but not quite. There was still a lively young spring in the trot, which Techno sorely missed and part of him envied every time they came closer.

He couldn't stay jealous for long, however. Not when his favourite—and quite frankly only—niece greeted him with a tender kiss to his cheek that made him melt. She was still smaller than him, perhaps by a head or two, but she had quickly surpassed everyone else in height.

Time hadn't been generous to many, but Michelle was one of the exceptions. The small little piglin had sprouted into a fully fledged warrior worthy of the name and her family's legacy, with skills and muscle to spare. Her fur grew as thick and fluffy as Techno's had been in his youth, and all traces of the Nether's infamous "zombie" infection had gone for good, healed completely by the fresh air of the Overworld. The only reminder was one empty eye socket that she always covered with an old eye-patch. She was more than happy with her role in the royal guard, as was the kingdom.

They were especially glad for it when the old general and guard captain was forced to retire from active duty.

Seepeekay came hobbling into the conversation behind Michelle, leaning on his cane. "Oh, I get it," he chuckled, "leave the dead weight behind. I thought I taught you better."

"You taught me very well," she agreed. "The protection of the kingdom comes before all else."

"Even me and my crooked foot?"

She wrapped him in a hug. "Even you and your crooked foot. Now—" She got back to business. "—someone's threatening my little brother, and I won't stand for it."

"Threatening? No, I would never threaten a prince of the realm," Tina tutted.

"She did, actually," the "victim" in question snitched.

"Oh, poor baby!" Michelle sighed dramatically and wrapped her brother up in her arms and ruffled his hair. "What are we to do with you?"

Tristan flailed in her grasp and tried to escape. "Watch the horns!"

"I wouldn't have to if you'd just stay still!"

She eventually let him go. He smoothed the bumps on his curly horns and gave her a sidelong glance.

The ram's horns had been a surprise, at first, but ultimately made sense considering Tristan's mother was a sheep hybrid. Many just seemed to forget that when the similarities everyone tended to see at first glance were the ones the Prince shared with his late father.

Technoblade found it somewhat amusing that Tristan's horns were bigger and curlier than Tubbo's, who was a full sheep hybrid himself. Genetics was a strange little science. Perhaps he should look into it one day.

"My point still stands," Michelle continued, reclaiming her proper stance. The mischievous glint in her eye, however, softened her words. "Anyone seen threatening the Crown Prince has to go through me."

Tristan beamed proudly. "See, Tina? You have no power here. I'm basically a god."

"Nevermind. On second thought, please do whatever you want to him."

"Wait, no! Come back!"

Tristan rushed off after his sister, pleas and compliments spilling desperately from his lips, as well as an attempt to bribe her back on his side with a serenade.

"They haven't really changed, have they?" Seepeekay sighed, sitting down on a nearby bench with a groan.

His injured foot twitched, jolting with phantom pains Technoblade could only imagine.

"You alright?" he checked.

The fox shrugged. "Missing my old life, but other than that I'm fine."

He wriggled his ankle and tried to flex his toes. They wouldn't respond, his lame foot destined to remain so for the rest of his life. He frowned.

"Should we get you some ointment?" Tina asked, sitting down beside him. "There's a fresh batch setting in the healing ward, I could go and ask—"

"It didn't work three months ago, I doubt it'll work now." He reached out and placed a paw on her shoulder. "I'd like some company, though. The three of us could just vegetate on this bench together and age. I'd like that."

"You're speaking like we're already sixty-something," Tina giggled.

"One day, we will be."

That wasn't too far off in Technoblade's case. His bones found that offer surprisingly inviting, but he declined in the end.

"I've got some royal babysitting to do," he apologized.

"Techno, Tristan is nearly seventeen. He can take care of himself."

"I don't like him going off places alone. I don't want to find him dead in a ditch."

It was far less of a joke as his tone may have made it seem.

He bid them farewell with a rushed promise of maybe joining them later—emphasis on the "maybe"—and went the way the two royal children had run off to.

Thankfully, he didn't find any of them in trouble. The trees were devoid of blood, and they were both breathing fine.

"When I was five, I hit Uncle Techno in the shin so hard he couldn't walk," Michelle was proudly telling her brother.

"I'm pretty sure you're just making all that up," Technoblade pressed to deny with a cough as he rejoined their side, his grizzled snout trying not to smile at the fond memory.

"No," Tristan smiled with a shit-eating grin. "I can definitely believe it."

Technoblade had to admit, it must have seemed hard for the young boy to picture him as a once powerful and unbeatable warrior. His body simply

didn't seem to hold up with his legendary reputation anymore. After decades of wanting to retire, here he was, retiring. Vegetating, as Seepeekay would put it.

So, this was what all the fuss was about. He wasn't going to lie, he didn't know what exactly he was expecting, but it was fine. He could work with it. At least he wasn't getting blood tangled in his fur every minute, or his palms nicked by his blade.

That was worth it, even if most of his duties did now resort to more quaint little tasks.

Speaking of them, those two "quaint little tasks" who liked to tease him were preparing to run off ahead, once again.

"Come on, young Toreador," Michelle snickered, tossing him one of her sabres, "*en garde*! I trust your sword skills have improved?"

Tristan scoffed. "Since last week? You tell me!"

"What? I thought you would have done at least some training! What's Uncle Techno been doing this whole time?"

"Sleeping and eating, mostly," the piglin replied. "Can't do much when your brother prefers to languish his days away with his music."

"Languish?" he spluttered, indignant. "I was *working*! I told you I almost finished the piece! I'm so close, I just need a couple more chords."

"And you'll finally let me listen to it?"

"I promised, didn't I?"

"You promised," he agreed.

"And have I ever broken a promise?"

Bright eyes Technoblade hadn't completely decided if they were blue or green searched for an honest answer.

If there was one thing Techno and the boy had in common, it was keeping their word.

"You never have."

"There we go, then. I'm just waiting for the right moment."

He handed him his guitar for safekeeping, then joined his sister's side.

The right moment, as always. Technoblade wouldn't rush him.

These things took time and right now, they had plenty of it to spare. He liked the idea of being patient just a little longer.

He sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree that creaked and bent under his weight. He watched as Michelle corrected Tristan's stance and revised a few moves with him, all before teaching him a new form of foil and parry. The boy was a quick learner and threw his heart and soul into the task at hand, and even despite his blunders persevered with a smile.

If the piglin closed his eyes, he could almost feel the stiff wind of his beloved tundra stroke his fur, and the laughter rippling from two other figures buried in the past. Ranboo tried to take the lesson into his own hands and help Sam master the blade. Sam listened carefully, eyes alight with a fondness mirrored in Technoblade's own and he watched them.

When he opened his eyes, Sam's figure melted into that of his son's. Years and oceans apart, he was still there, embedded into every part of Tristan like a stubborn but loving thorn.

You're not around to be proud of him, but I am, Technoblade couldn't help but tell Sam's memory. I'll love him enough for both of us, until you finally get to meet him.

He hoped that day would be far, far off.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Broken House

It had taken a while for Ranboo to grasp the meaning of a dysfunctional family. At first, he just thought the word dysfunctional in the term meant a strange family, a family that was not usual, maybe pieced together with people one would have never expected to be in a family.

That was when he had started calling the Syndicate his dysfunctional family. It had taken wide eyes and a long sit down with them for him to grasp the error.

A dysfunctional family was not a strange one or an unusual one, it was a family that wasn't so.

A family was a group of people that loved one another unconditionally, that were bonded either by blood or another power he could not understand, that were there for each other no matter what and filled with affection.

Unfortunately a dysfunctional one was none of those beautiful things. It was in fact, in most cases, quite the opposite.

Dysfunctional families were barely families at all. They screamed at each other, there was abuse, there was betrayal from all sides, there were problems no one knew or wanted to solve properly. With his new definition on hand, Ranboo started to realize he had likely seen more dysfunctional families than he had loving ones.

There was Philza's for instance.

Phil, Tommy and Wilbur, to be exact. There were great problems there, that was no news to anyone. That was what had originally driven a wedge between a fatherly do-gooder like Sam and Phil. The avian was seen as a disgrace of a father and while he was none of the sort at heart, Ranboo had to admit that some of his actions had been questionable. The fact that to an outside eye Phil didn't seem to care about Tommy—and to an inside one that he was too much of a chicken to confront things that needed to be confronted—that Tommy would lash out at Phil, that Wilbur had threatened, traumatized and hurt many members of his family and ended up dying by one of their blades... There was so much wrong, and Ranboo couldn't remember it all even if he tried. To those who didn't know the full extent of that situation, the love inside it looked to be minimal at best, even nonexistent.

It was there, but it was twisted, strained, occasionally snapped. It had been patched up so many times that their whole relationship looked far more shredded than it had been complete.

There was nothing functional about that family, nothing but the constant streams and plethora of mistakes and pain each of them had kept buried deep within them. That, above all else, had remained consistent.

Ranboo hoped that they were all at peace, now. Maybe they had made up in death and fixed the bond they had destroyed in life.

Ranboo had also seen many others, although not as personally as he knew Phil's story. He had briefly heard about Captain Puffy, where she came from, what had happened with Tubbo and Schlatt. He had seen desperate families during Doomsday, parents saving their own skins instead of those of their children, brothers pushing brothers, and all around selfish sacrifices.

Similarly, he had seen those who saw no problems with shoving kids into the jaws of death under the pretense that they needed to fight for their land like everyone else and learn how things like this were done. Anyone who thought that was morally correct couldn't have been from a good and loving family, or if so then men and beasts could sadly be as senselessly twisted as he thought.

There were many dysfunctional families in the SMP. Ranboo just never imagined he'd be part of one.

All this time Ranboo had counted himself lucky. Despite the wars and the strife he had found people he trusted and loved. He had found friends as he had found family, where he himself had none that he could remember. No parents, siblings, nothing. He had wandered into the SMP with nothing but an empty head. Despite everything, he was one lucky bastard.

Lucky, lucky, lucky.

He had done everything he could to preserve that. He fought for it day and night when war and turmoil came and went, and he sacrificed so much of himself in the process.

Just like everything in the SMP, that all came to a jarring halt and downhill spiral eventually.

The family he was part of was now dysfunctional, but he wondered if it was even a family at all—if he was even still a part of it. He would never know.

He loved Michael, but he barely saw him anymore. Snowchester was now unofficially off limits, and even as the young piglin grew up, he very rarely went specifically looking for his father. Ranboo often felt his being spark with—well, not hatred, but something close to it, at the thought that Tubbo had poisoned his son against him.

Michael denied it, but still he would not admit what it was that made him hesitant to so much as greet Ranboo from afar.

Tubbo's angry shadow was there, always, even if the ram himself was not.

It was dysfunctional, there was no hiding it. There was the cold, disgraced warden, and the criminal that had helped break a murderer from jail. It sounded like the beginning of a bad joke. Ranboo had dearly hoped it would be.

After being all but exiled from Snowchester, Ranboo didn't exactly have anywhere to go.

Eret offered him a room in the Greater SMP's palace for a while, which Ranboo agreed to originally, but soon it became too much. It was alright for business matters, but nothing else. He felt too close to everything. He needed space.

In the end, he elected to travel through the Nether and through a portal to a hidden base in the mountains his memory book pages had mentioned once or twice. Sam wasn't here anymore; he wouldn't mind if Ranboo made his old house his own. After all, he had replaced Sam in regards to the prison, why not replace him elsewhere?

The crime was already committed. He couldn't exactly go back. He didn't want to run too far forwards either, though.

He just stayed somewhere in the middle of it all. He had long accepted what had happened in his past, but he was pacing his future carefully. Every step was cautiously calculated, its consequences or lasting impact double, triple and quadruple checked, and even then he forced himself to get Eret's stamp of approval for his own peace of mind.

Seasons passed, and most days, things were okay.

Ranboo leaned back into his role by Eret's side, and his misguided hiccup regarding Pandora's Vault was happily overlooked by many. He was often questioned, however: how was the search for the escapee going?

"Good, we're getting close," he'd lie to their faces and move on.

He was done with it all.

The armour he wore as Warden was locked safely away in a secret room inside of Sam's old home, and his harpoon was only taken out for required occasions, such as training and the like. Perhaps the only good thing to have come out of it all was that Ranboo had finally found a weapon he was fully comfortable with wielding. It complimented his lanky figure and gave him a long-reach freedom he had only briefly had with bows—briefly, because he was a terrible shot.

As always, Eret focused on the good rather than on the bad. He took great interest in Ranboo's new weapon skills and persuaded him to teach him too. He did, gladly, and they spent many pleasant afternoons together.

Ranboo latched on strongly to Eret as Time passed, almost as if he had no one else. Well, he did, but...

As with everything nowadays, it was complicated.

It wasn't too far from the truth, though. Everyone had someone: Velvet had Ant, Bad had Skeppy, Niki had Hannah and Tubbo had Michael. Ranboo was left relatively alone, and he didn't like it. He was still friends—or at the very least had decent relations—with the majority of them, but something had changed in the dynamics. Something he knew was his own fault, and he couldn't seem to fix it.

Only Eret still behaved as he always did around Ranboo, so he stuck there. He liked Eret, and Eret liked him.

Eret liked him a lot, and that meant he cared for him.

That meant he encouraged Ranboo to seek some more friendly skies than just the monarch's own. That was often the reason he ended up here, in the bakery, so often.

Except today there was a nasty surprise.

"Tubbo."

"Ranboo."

They glared at each other. Ranboo desperately wanted to fiddle with his fingers, but he restrained himself. His nails dug deep into his palms as he clenched his fists. His tail was caught beneath his foot, immobilizing its nervous swishing.

"This... is a surprise," he pushed out with a fair amount of difficulty.

"It is."

Tubbo's tone was made of stone, and as cold as the shoulder he had given him for a while now. A while sounded banal.

It had been sixteen years.

Niki hovered over Tubbo's shoulder behind the counter, her hand paused on the till. Hannah sped up her whisking, shooting the occasional glance towards the confrontation—even in serious times, she was the least subtle person Ranboo had ever known. Velvet took to whistling an upbeat tune and feigned ignoring them, just simply going on about his day in the bakery. Ranboo, however, had noticed how his breathing shuddered and messed up his whistles. When they messed up, they got louder, and when they got louder they got more panicked and out of tune.

Tubbo snapped his head around and glared at him. "Velvet, shut up."

"Don't talk to him like that," Ranboo jumped in without thinking. Big mistake.

Tubbo snapped his attention and his attitude back his way. He was still young, but the years had not been kind to him. He looked more exhausted than ever before, with black bags underneath his eyes, a scraggly beard and thick lines running down the corners of his mouth, only digging deeper when his face twisted.

"Don't you fucking tell me what to do," he bleated indignantly.

Ranboo stood his ground. "It's his bakery."

"It's my migraine he's pissing off. What are you even doing here?"

"I am allowed to go anywhere I want. Niki's my friend. What are you doing here?"

"Niki's my friend too, and I'm actually a paying customer who's not squandering off their kindness like a blood-sucking leech."

"Boys," Niki tutted with a warning ring of the counter's bell. "I'm about to become *neither* of your friends if you keep this up."

People were watching, the unfortunate surprise meeting no longer privy to secret glances. Seated customers cowered behind the chairs' backrests, trying to scooch out of the way just in case a fight were to break out. Others who were simply browsing the display windows grew uninterested by the cakes and muffins. Hannah put down her whisk and fluttered over to stand behind Niki, hand grabbing at her arm. Even Velvet had stopped, leaning against a back wall with a thunderous glare directed at the ram. He whistled no more.

Ranboo scrutinized Tubbo, desperately trying to search his aging face for a sign. Any sign of his old, dear companion, his platonic lover and his best friend until the end of time. He looked for that mischievous glint, that shadow of a clever smirk, even just a shuffle that would usually bring along a bone-crushing hug in its aftermath.

Anything, anything at all.

The ram coughed, then pushed right past him and out the door. The bell over the threshold flew into a frenzy. The whole bakery shuddered as the door slammed back into place.

Ranboo's heart tightened.

He slunk over to the counter, back hunched, steps heavy, and still very much aware of the intrigued gazes all around him. His long, pointed ears tried to shield his face.

He sheepishly rang the bell with trembling fingers, although there was certainly no need.

"A bag of cookies, please," he whispered.

Niki slapped him across the face.

The second unwelcome surprise of the day.

"You're both impossible!" she cried, shaking her wrist from the impact. "This has been going on for years now, and now you've brought it into my shop! What the hell happened between you two?"

Ranboo rubbed his cheek. He kept his eyes down. "One bag of cookies, please..." he repeated, his whispered tone turning to a dry one.

"Not until you tell me."

"I forgot."

"Nice try." Niki leaned forward. "Ranboo, whatever's going on, you know you can talk to me about it, right?"

He looked up only slightly, just enough to glare and make his point. "Not this time. One bag of cookies, please."

She sighed, then waved to Hannah. The fairy obeyed immediately, stuffing a generous handful of cookies into a paper bag like her life depended on it. She handed it back to Niki and retreated to a safe distance, as if Ranboo was going to explode at any moment.

He probably would, just not with anger. Far from it.

"It's not going to be the next time either, is it?"

Defeated, he shook his head.

"I thought so..."

A hand came to cup his cheek, soothing the slap, palm and fingertips rougher than he remembered them being. He raised his gaze.

Even throughout the years, Niki's eyes never changed. So soft and caring, but veiled in a somber gaze so similar to the sky of a bleak mid-winter. Grey, tired, but still bright enough to bring comfort.

He hung on to that small glow above everything else.

"I'm always here for you."

If he had a gold coin for every time he heard that...

"I know." He leaned into her touch. "But this time, it's better if you're not."

"You always say that."

"And you always contradict me."

She gave him a small smile. "Always, and my point still stands. I'm always here for you."

"Uh, Niki? You better come quick," Hannah ventured, cautiously tapping Niki's shoulder out of the corner of Ranboo's eye.

When Niki shrugged her off, Velvet stepped in. "It's the sculk."

Something jolted in her. She let her hand and her gaze let go of Ranboo. She turned around.

Always there, except when she couldn't be.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Hannah and Velvet shared a look. "It's better if you come check it out yourself."

For a moment, she hesitated. She looked from her two friends back to Ranboo, and from Ranboo back to her two friends. Her fingers drummed faster and faster on the counter, in time with the beating of the hybrid's heart.

With a sigh, she eventually caved in to the more serious problem—or at least the one that Ranboo knew she could somewhat solve.

"It's on the house," she said, handing him his cookies and giving him an apologetic frown. "Take care of yourself, alright? Stay safe."

There was no problem there. Some things didn't dare touch him with a nine foot pole.

Outside the bakery, he tried to desperately turn his thoughts to something else. The biscuits leaked their warmth through the bag, fresh out of the oven. The dough was crisp and crumbling, and the chocolate chips melted on his hands, gooey and oh so inviting.

Niki's pastries were always delicious, but not these ones. When he took a bite, Ranboo could taste nothing at all. It crumbled, it oozed, but there was no taste.

If he was being honest, there hadn't been any taste for years.

And it was not Niki's fault.

When a widespread tragedy took place somewhere, it was rare that people willingly went there anymore—at least, in the SMP.

It was unfortunate, really. It felt like they were all too scared to confront their past. The only time some were visited—such as Las Nevadas and L'Manberg—it was to pick the ruins apart for something good. Material things they could use to build new History, one that would be hopefully more peaceful. They were ready to tear down their past mistakes to do it, to pretend the blood on their hands was nothing but ink.

The Bowl Valley was one of the places that was left alone. It didn't even have a proper name—it was known as "that" battlefield, "that" place. On maps, cartographers couldn't settle on a common name, but the Bowl Valley was the one that appeared more often. It was the one Tubbo chose to keep.

Barely anyone ventured there. It was the battlefield where more filial blood was spilt than any other, and with that horrific realization came the stomach-wrenching guilt no one dared face head on. They left that tragedy to rot where it belonged, in a curved, secluded valley that bore no material importance except a bloody one.

There was no need to go there anymore.

There was nothing there, for anyone.

Nothing but an untouched landscape of stunning natural beauty.

Nothing but a perfect haven for outlaws.

The slopes and mountain passes that had once been slippery with death and daunting for his young little ram's hooves. Tubbo could make the trip there blindfolded if he wanted to now. He knew every stone, every tree and shrub, and every hidden shortcut down into the valley's cradle. He got to know where the eagles nested and where the creepers hunted at night, as well as which berry bushes bloomed when. He momentarily stopped to pick some blackberries, carefully wrapping them up in a handkerchief and placing them in his basket.

If he was being completely honest, he felt more at home in this disgraced place than he did anywhere else.

As his hooves finally touched the grassy field, the sun's rays caught the bronze plaque embedded into the ground. The commemorative stone pillar standing over it cast its long shadow, a strict and immortal sentinel of its commemoration. Two antiques lay beside its base, both relics of a nightmarish past: a metal prosthetic arm and a white, smiling mask.

BEFORE YOU LIES A GRAVEYARD OF MANY AND A TESTAMENT TO PEACE
AND DETERMINATION

The first couple of lines on the plaque were sugar-coated to seem valiant and appealing. The rest were unreadable, overgrown with weeds and rubbed smooth by the passage of careless animals.

The rare few travellers who did decide to go and pay their respects to the battleground never went any further than the small monument. They would stand in awe and hushed respect, admiring the view. Twisting grimaces and sullen eyes would try to picture what true horrors took place there, all fantasies simply deformed versions of what the History books or word to mouth pushed forward to the masses. Then, they'd turn around and leave, the Bowl Valley joining the lists of places they passed on their journeys.

Tubbo was not a passing traveller. He was a regular. He crossed its invisible boundary without a moment of hesitation.

He could still see the explosion holes, he could still picture the fires and the rivers of blood, but all that was gone now. All that remained was soft grass and sunlight as far as the eye could see, surrounded by sturdy, protective walls of jagged stone.

A perfect, undisturbed heaven indeed.

Perfect for a new life.

He headed towards the door of a small house pressed against the stone. He knocked at the front door, and a familiar face opened up.

"Hey, Tubbo!" Aimsey cried, welcoming him with a big hug. Her nose twitched and she unceremoniously shoved it into the basket. "What do you have there...?"

"Oi!" He swatted her away. "Nose out! Patience is a virtue."

"Well I'm not very virtuous, then."

"Anyone could have told you that."

He went over to the kitchen table and began to unload the basket under Aimsey's watchful—and hungry—eyes. He took out a couple of loaves of bread, the makeshift pouch brimming with blackberries, a pot of honey from the Snowchester beehives and a thick leg of ham tied up with string.

Aimsey's eyes widened as he put them down one by one, as they always did. Tubbo would never tire of seeing the wonder brimming in them every time he came with something. He was about to see them sparkle even more, and he reached for the last thing in the basket.

"And this is for you."

He handed her a new set of paints in a perfectly undamaged tin.

Aimsey immediately made a pleased sound and took it, flipping open the lid and fondly caressing the pigments laid inside.

"Just in time, too! I've run out of green and I've almost finished my piece."

She hopped over to a corner of the room to an easel. The canvas propped up against it was concealed by a sheet she rushed to pull off. She got back to work.

Tubbo had never thought that a single, childish drawing of a flower would spark something in Aimsey, let alone a hidden talent she spent the subsequent years perfecting. She specialized in landscapes, and what better muse was there than Mother Nature's gentle blanket stretched out over the old battlefield.

There was a moment when Tubbo looked at her paintings that almost fooled him into thinking all was beautiful and well in the world. Her finished pieces all hung on the wooden and stone walls of the house settled adjacent to the

rocky mountainside, each chronologically displayed and showing off an increasing improvement of her craft.

However, Aimsey's first two flowers—drawn in crayon one day at a kitchen table, in a time where lots of things were happier and simpler—took pride of place over the mantelpiece, framed and still bursting with their original bright colours.

Tubbo leaned against the table. "So I'm guessing you're not going to help me put all this away, huh?"

A dismissive, not entirely attentive hum was the only reply he got.

It was like being faced with a teenage Michael all over again.

The ram smiled, and took it upon himself to sort things out himself. He left one loaf of bread on the table and wrapped up the other one to freeze it later. He washed the blackberries and put them in a jar, then hung up the meat next to a bunch of dried thyme sprigs.

He didn't live here, but he acted like he did. He took pride in knowing he had helped build this quaint little life for his two friends. He had done something good, and he did so alone.

He didn't need anyone else.

He was capable.

He didn't need to be tied down by anything, no matter how heavy his heart was when he claimed so.

"Where's Eryn?"

This time, Aimsey heard him. She tilted her head a little. "He was feeding the animals, last time I checked," she said, immediately returning to her art.

He went out to find him.

The seclusion in the valley was practically absolute, but they still weren't going to take any chances.

The animals that were kept were ones that strayed too far from their herds or abandoned to the harshness of the elements. They were kept in spacious pens amidst the clump of trees seemingly so out of place compared to the vast, grassy wilderness all around. The dense vegetation provided the

perfect camouflage, and the barnyard cacophony was carried away by the wind waltzing through the branches.

Tubbo found Eryn just as he came out of the sheep pen. He greeted him with a wide smile, his arms occupied.

"You're just in time," the fireborn whispered, adjusting his hold on the sleepy little bundle of wool in his arms. "Meet the new kid."

The lamb let out a breathy bleat and a yawn, and snuggled closer into its handler's warmth. Eryn pressed a soft kiss to the top of its head.

He was so soft and loving, so sweet to those smaller and weaker than him. He was earning Tubbo's forgiveness and respect more and more with each passing visit.

There was no way he could ever be branded a monster. He just couldn't.

Tubbo stroked the lamb's fleece. "Good, now you'll have a stand-in for me when I'm not around."

"You practically live here."

"People are starting to get suspicious."

"Only starting? Damn, how dense are they all?"

"No idea, but Niki asked me today if I wanted to talk to her about something."

"And did you?"

"Beyond baking?" He shook his head. "She didn't probe too much."

"That's good." Eryn cradled the lamb and made kissy-faces at it. "Isn't that right, Mr Snuggles?"

"Mr Snuggles?"

"That's his name."

"Oh gods, I'm fine with being replaced, but not by someone named Mr Snuggles!"

His loud chuckles awoke the lamb, who baahed indignantly. Tubbo didn't pay much mind to him, and not just because of his ridiculous sounding name.

He could let everything down in the Bowl Valley, from his guard to his laughter. He could let it all fly over the rocky peaks and prance through the soft grass. He could do anything. He could be anything here. He could—

Something gripped his chest.

He stopped mid-chuckle, throat constricting. He gasped.

He was choking.

As he struggled to expel air, he collapsed onto one of the pens. The goats inside retreated to a safe distance, jostling one another and watching the scene from a safe distance.

Eryn immediately dropped the lamb back over the sheep pen to join its mother and rushed to Tubbo's aid.

Tubbo felt the hands and he heard the murmured words in his ears, but he couldn't do anything about them. He couldn't move, he couldn't reply.

He coughed out a hurricane.

Colours swirled in front of his eyes, hues of blue and turquoise clouding his vision until his head was dizzy. Everything inside him shifted, making room for something else. Something writhing and wriggling, feasting on things it shouldn't, pushing life out of its way to make room for its twisting growths.

Tubbo had never felt anything like it before. He had never felt such coldness, such dread.

He had never felt so close to Death.

As soon as it had started, it was over. Tubbo composed himself and desperately gulped down a few lungfuls of fresh air.

Eryn's gloved palms were warm. They pressed against his cheeks and his chest, attempting desperately to hold him upright.

The ram could do that himself. He waited until his jellied knees stopped knocking and hauled himself back onto his hooves. Clearing his throat, he turned around.

Eryn's face was lax with fear. He tried to stutter out something—likely the three worded, generic "are you alright?"—but not a single syllable made its way out.

Tubbo took the lead. "It's just a cold."

He had never had one like this before, though.

That cough was nothing like the other ones, the first he paid no mind to in recent times despite lacking all other symptoms of a rheumy illness. It was just a cough, an attack of one of those out of place summertime colds some people got. Maybe he had just strolled down the Snowchester streets without a coat too many times. That was all.

But that was far from anything he thought it logically could be.

"Are you sure?" Eryn asked, skeptical. "That was..."

"Rough?"

"...scary."

Scary.

"I'm fine." He needed to sit down. He wanted a drink. "Could I stay for dinner?"

It was like he didn't need to ask. An extra place was set with no problem, and that evening the ambiance lightened considerably. Their meal was speckled with banter and jokes, but one or two times, Tubbo did catch his two friends' gazes lingering on him when they thought he wasn't looking.

He didn't know how or when Eryn had told Aimsey of the episode earlier on, but it had garnered a similar concern from the bunny.

They were overreacting. Tubbo was fine. He was great. Everything was alright.

He still however could not completely brush aside the writhing creature inside him, feasting on everything it could sink its teeth into.

Michael liked the forests of the Greater SMP. The trees were cozier and tighter-knit, and undeniably warmer than the sparse spruce groves in the snowy wasteland of Snowchester. They were prettier too.

Many would beg to disagree, likening the snowdrifts to hills of rolling, shimmering crystals and frozen waves of lace. Those were the ones who didn't grow up there.

Michael, all things considered, was a Nether creature—not in heart, but in physical body. The cold was never something he ever fully got used to.

He preferred the warmth, even if it was mild. He liked to watch the seasons come and go, which was relatively impossible in the stiff and pale tundra. Michael wanted change; he liked change.

All change, except for the one that tore his whole home-life apart. He could have done without that one.

He tried to keep it all relatively normal, regardless. He still however could not chase away the nagging thought that this was always meant to be.

Maybe he was meant to be alone.

It was a dark thought, but an understandable one in the circumstances that had befallen him some years ago.

Well, if he was meant to be alone, he'd make-do. The forest would be there when others weren't. He could count on trees and bushes more than he could people. It was a sad little thought to have, but he had it nonetheless.

The sun was setting; it was time he headed home. Tubbo was on dinner duty tonight, or so he was supposed to be. He rarely actually kept to that anymore. There were many nights where Michael was left to eat alone, with no note or pre-made meal to excuse his father's absence. It was fine, he was used to it now, but it still stung.

Nevertheless, there was always a chance Tubbo would be there. They could spend a nice evening together. Michael could show him the watercolours of the forest he painted today, and bask in the warmth of his father's proud grin and compliments.

He gathered up the pieces laid out to dry on the grass and slipped them into his cardboard-lined folder, carefully tying it all together with yarn and tucking it protectively under his arm. He emptied the dirty, multicoloured water into a bush, snapped his paint tin shut and slipped it into his satchel along with his pencil and paintbrushes, then emerged from the clearing and rejoined the path.

The sun's last rays tumbled through the canopy and cast golden spots on the dusty track before him, a yellow brick road of illusion guiding him through pure and natural beauty. If he had time, he would have stopped and drawn out one last piece. The light was fading fast, however, and his stomach was growling and gurgling in starved fury. A painting project for another time, perhaps.

Before long, the peaceful forest trails gave way to the Prime Path, jostling with the end-of-day rush of tired workers desperate to let their heads hit the pillows or fill their pumping blood with beer and ale. Although Michael loved the secluded woods and walks, he didn't mind the hubbub of the busy streets either. In both cases, he could lose himself entirely and mindlessly let destiny shove him wherever it wanted him to go.

He passed by the bakery, where Niki would always wave to him and stop sweeping the doorstep to catch up with him.

Usually.

Not tonight, it seemed, for the first time in forever.

Michael stopped in his tracks and waited, trying to peep in through the glass vitrines and glimpse any sign of life inside. When he saw none, that was when he knew something was wrong. Hannah and Velvet seemed to have disappeared too. Everything was still.

Fighting was not Michael's fortay, but he was ready to do whatever it took to make sure three of the most consistent and present people in his life were safe.

He cocked his ear and soon picked up familiar voices. They came from around the back of the shop. He followed them, straining to catch snippets of the conversation at hand.

"When did this happen?"

"It must have been in the last hour or so, because it wasn't like this this morning."

"Flowers fully blooming in less than a day?"

"It can happen. I've seen it done before. Anyway, these ones have been growing for more than a decade now; it was about time they actually bloomed."

"Wait, Hannah, you knew about this?"

"Uh..."

"And you didn't tell us?"

"I might have, uh, forgotten."

"Forgotten?"

"Willingly, maybe... Listen, you both had so much on your plates, I wasn't about to dump anymore. Then I forgot."

Michael stepped in.

From the guilt and panic smeared across their faces, he wondered if he had just stumbled into the midst of a strange cult meeting.

"Michael," Niki sighed, relieved when she recognized him, "what are you doing here?"

"Looking for you." His eyes were focused on anywhere but them. "What is that?"

The sculk, he knew. Everyone knew what it was. Everyone had seen it. There were patches everywhere now, but with it being a seemingly docile thing, it had become no more than a background familiarity.

Now it was growing in height rather than wriggling in length across the ground. Tendrils and buds curled like stiff snakes up into bushy patches of dark blue and shimmering turquoise.

One of the flowers turned its slimy head towards him. He took a startled step back. The smell wafting out of its open petals was foul, putrid and rancid. It made him gag. He covered his sensitive piglin snout with his sleeve and breathed deeply. His own sweat had never been so sweet to his senses.

"I didn't know it could even grow flowers," Velvet admitted.

Niki turned to him. "We can't keep this hidden" she decided, casting a sidelong glance towards Hannah. The fairy cowered out of guilt. "Go tell the Badlands. Hannah and I will go and investigate the other spots and see if they're growing more too."

"What about me?" Michael interrupted, eager to help in any way he could. "What can I do?"

Niki smiled softly and reached up to ruffle the fur on the top of his head. "Tell your father, just in case. He can bring it to more leaders' attention than we probably can."

Michael was about to ask which one, but he stopped himself. It was obvious.

It was the father that still lived in Snowchester, the one everyone had thought Michael had sided with. He only stayed close to Tubbo because he had been too young to do otherwise. He was bound to his quiet household by vulnerability and youth, nothing more.

To everyone else, that meant he preferred one over the other. That wasn't true: he hadn't sided with either of them. As he grew, he ended up resenting them both.

His sour attitude only worsened when Michelle began regularly writing to him.

He finally got himself to admit it: he was jealous of her. At first it was a childish envy rooted in youth. Every kid dreamed of living in a castle one day, that was nothing new, but as the years passed the jealousy didn't disappear.

She was training under the tutorage of the royal guard. She became a princess and gave it up to become a soldier.

She had everything going for her. He didn't. So when she asked about Michael's life, he lied.

He made up stories about a loving, happy family living an exciting, happy life. Every word he wrote made him angry and killed a part of him until he couldn't feel anything anymore, not even empathy.

When Michelle's tear tracks smudged the announcement of her father's death, he felt nothing. He gave no words of comfort. He couldn't muster them. Instead he waited a month or two then pretended he hadn't received anything. Their correspondence carried on as usual.

The deceit continued.

Michael described a holiday so beautiful and so wonderful it became his go-to fantasy escape for a whole year. Michelle fondly complained about the antics of her little brother.

That was something else he envied madly; Michelle had a brother. She had a confidant, a friend.

Michael didn't. When he was a kid, the realms were wrecked by war. When the time of peace arrived, he had needed no one but Michelle. When she had left, other children were too scared to approach him, too admiring of his dad's to accidentally risk doing something to their son.

And while Michael's bitterness grew, his desire to create bonds dwindled. He locked himself away with his pencils and his dreams, but even in his fantasies he wasn't happy.

He would have given everything for a brother even for just a day or two. Tristan seemed to have made Sam's death a bit more bearable for Michelle. Michael wished that someone would help him with the loss of both his fathers.

No one knew what had happened between them, least of all their own son. No one had told him. He had learned to never ask, either. There was no point.

All he'd be met with would be a cold shoulder or a strained smile. Not even a word, unless it was to change the subject.

The ignorance was what he hated above all, and by association he heavily disliked those who kept drilling it in.

Both his fathers, separately, of course, had chalked his distancing down to some sort of teenage rebellious phase. They didn't worry too much about it, which was a red flag—just because he wasn't fighting in wars or letting out his adolescent rage with sword swings like they had didn't mean it wasn't serious.

And yet, it was still just "a phase" to them.

When that phase stretched out over a longer period of time than was the habit, they again both brushed it off as a young adult's search for independence. Even when he moved out of Tubbo's cabin and took up residence in the one with the windmill at the top of the hill, they didn't bat an eye. He wasn't too far after all, and his fake smiles seemed real enough.

In truth, Michael was sick of it. He was sick of it all; every lie, every strained meeting, every unanswered question and dodged reply. It was all too much.

When he got home that evening, he was alone. Tubbo was nowhere to be found.

Surprise, surprise.

It was too familiar to be worth any form of disappointment. He wasn't hungry anyway.

Michael climbed up the ladder to his room and began sorting through today's picture haul. In the light of his bedside lamp, his artist's eye stared at them critically, one by one.

Those he considered as failed were shoved in a box and stuffed out of sight underneath his bed. Relatively decent ones were stuffed all together in a separate portfolio for posterity's sake. Finally, those he was particularly proud of were displayed on his wall.

There was only one that earned that privilege from today. There was nothing particularly eye-catching about the subject, but he was impressed by his own precise brushstrokes. It was a piece that clearly showed hard work and overall progress. That alone was reason enough to love it.

He searched for a suitable place to hang it. It was certainly much easier said than done, as most of this room was tapestried with paper, paint and pencil. There was only one single eyesore to be seen, and yet Michael still hesitated to take it down.

Artistically, there was much left to be desired. He had an excuse, he was only ten at the time, but he still considered it his first real masterpiece because of the subject and the love behind it.

A happy little family, scrawled on a crumpled sheet of flimsy paper he had likely snatched from his father's desk.

He contemplated it for a minute or two more. His mind drifted away from his current reality and into one he missed above everything else.

Michael was an artist, not a poet. He worked with deeds, not long lost fantasies and words.

He said nothing. He reached over and pinned up his new painting directly over the other one, hiding it for the first time, almost ashamed, since its creation.

He felt nothing as he did so. What was done was done. He could breathe.

Out of sight, out of mind.

It was better that way.

Chapter Thirty-Six: Golden Sun

Prince Tristan of the Southern Lands was born into riches—and unlike most noble heirs whose stories had been told over time, he was more than fine with that.

He wasn't thirsty for adventure or any form of material liberation as many heroes were. He liked his life.

Ever since he was a child, he loved running through the vast palace halls and rooms, exploring the secret passageways and climbing wherever he could without a care. He could go wherever he pleased, do whatever he wanted. The only thing able to limit his possibilities was his mind and his morality, both which had fortunately cultivated carefully by those closest to him.

He was spoiled with luxury and made the most of it, but also made sure others could appreciate it too.

He would never back down when faced with the opportunity to help those in need, share his fortune or indulge in simpler activities. He liked helping the servants here and there, bending to tasks like cooking and cleaning with no qualms. He dressed himself and took care of the cleaning of his own room. He helped Tina weed and prune in the grounds or Seapeekay and his sister by polishing armour and weapons alike. He treated the staff as equals, paid them handsome tips and learned more about them and their families.

He had even had a couple of romantic partners hailing from the working quarters, such as one of the stablehands and one of the footmen's sons who played the violin in the small gaggle of court musicians. None of them saw any shame with being open with their relationships, and had amiably broken up for reasons other than a startling difference in rank.

That wasn't to say he was a perfect angel by any means. Sometimes, his spirited suggestions and questions came off as insolent, or charismatic quips as poorly hidden slips of arrogance. Friends and family pointed it out, but the rest of the Court rarely did—he was still the Crown Prince, after all.

He didn't do any of it out of sly purpose or to prove a point. It was simply a case of a growing teenager still working his way around life and his own behaviour. He apologized when he needed to—profusely if he forgot—and tried to learn from any mistakes he made. He was careful, most of the time.

The wariness carried over into the small but soon-to-be important political role he held within the cabinet. It wasn't as vocal or game changing as the rest of his family's, or even all the other advisors for that matter. He was there to watch and learn the ins and outs of his own country and how to rule

in preparation for a day he hoped would be far, far off. That wasn't to say he remained silent. He wasn't afraid to let his voice and his suggestions be heard, and was even encouraged to do so.

That was how his father had initially gained the government's respect, after all, when he had first arrived in the South. He son could very well do the same.

Tristan was wealthy in far more than simply money and jewels; he was wealthy in reputation, respect, talent, and with love.

His mother specifically showered him with it whenever she had the chance. She gave all she had and then some to him and his sister, and they adored her just as strongly right back. Any brief window of time they could spend together as a family, they would, whether it be hunting, taking a walk or even spending a night in front of a warm fire with marshmallows and roasted chestnuts.

Tonight, just as the sun was starting to set and a couple of hours before the annual Saint-Jacques' ball, was no different.

The ballroom was mainly empty, as all the decorations and refreshments had been laid out hours—even days—prior. The only members of the palace staff present was a butler who took it upon himself to do one last sweep of the floor and the musicians tuning their instruments in a faraway corner, behind the pillars and the blue waving banners and silks.

The members of the royal family, all dressed up for the occasion, had decided to take a little down time before the party started. They'd be on their feet for the next several hours; it was definitely needed. They sat beside one of the stained glass windows, three huddled in the marble window seats and one sitting on a chair just in front, a handheld desk perched on his lap and a quill scratching at some paper. Their mother read to them both softly from a book Tristan wasn't paying much attention to. Michelle's head was snuggled into her lap.

Tristan pressed his head against the cool multicoloured glass, relishing in the refreshing feeling that would soon disappear as soon as the rest of the courtiers and their guests crammed themselves into the room. His hands drifted across the strings of his guitar, lazily plucking out whichever melodies came to his fleeting mind.

His mother's words went in one ear and out the other. All that stayed was the sound of her voice. He liked her voice; melodious, but defined by a rough edge, jagged from an upbringing and past that starkly contrasted with the lavish tranquillity of the one he had in the palace's gilded cradle. He liked it

when she'd put on an accent or change her tone for different characters, or how she'd make comments and remarks in hushed whispers to preserve the magic aura of her storytelling.

He liked how even while dressed up to the nines in peach pink satin and silk, laden with pearls and crowned in all her majesty in preparation for the evening's ball, she was still just herself.

Beneath the mask of a Queen, she was still just Puffy. She was still his mother.

His fingers slowed on his strings as his mind began to drift away fully upon waves of aimless thoughts.

"Tristan, sweetheart? Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." He briefly interrupted his playing and tugged a little at the collar of his uniform. The fabric stretched across his chest and back somehow strained tighter against his skin. "I swear it's smaller than the last time I wore it."

"It probably is." She reached over and brushed the lapels, attempting to adjust it so he was a little comfier. "My little boy's not so little anymore. You might even grow as tall as your father."

"You really think so?"

"That's one heck of a promise," Techno noted as he lowered his reading glasses down his snout.

"Well, Michelle managed. There's no reason why not."

"Still, couldn't it have happened some other time?" Tristan tugged at the neck again. "I don't want to choke by the end of the evening and die in front of a diplomatic gathering."

"We'll keep a side room vacant just in case," Technoblade snickered, turning back to his work.

He and Michelle—and Tristan too—found the quip amusing. Puffy decidedly did not.

She shot the piglins a couple of warning glares before focusing back on the Prince. "There'll be no need. You're going to be fine, sweetheart, trust me, but if you really don't feel well enough—"

"I do."

"But if you're not—"

"Ma." He reached out and held her hands, giving her a reassuring smile. "I'm fine, really. I was exaggerating, nothing more."

Her hands were warm, and they gripped his with a loving, firm touch before they slipped away and back to her lap. Michelle closed her eyes and arched her head up, searching for a head scratch, while Puffy's other hand went back to the book at hand. She didn't read out loud again, instead letting her eyes absent-mindedly wander the pages.

Tristan filled the quiet with more music, fingers pulling out a familiar tune that woke all of them up fully. It was gai and lively, known to all by at least passing ear if not intimately. It was perhaps one of the best-known songs in the Old World, one whose notoriety and that of the opera it came from never faltered even as its old home crumbled and burned away.

It was a difficult piece to play on the guitar and usually required intent concentration all throughout. The Prince had played it back to front so many times he didn't need to anymore. It was one of the many melodies that was inscribed permanently into his body and soul.

As he finished the piece, Michelle craned her neck back to catch Puffy's eyes. "You see why I call him Toreador, now?"

"You do play that song a lot," their mother agreed.

"It's Uncle Techno's favourite," he replied.

His uncle raised his gaze from his own book and smiled at him. The consideration was much appreciated.

"Very few other songs have managed to surpass Bizet's masterpiece in my heart," the piglin told them, then glanced at the Queen. "Which reminds me, a touring company has requested permission to set up in the royal theater for an evening or two on their journey."

"Which company?" Puffy asked.

"Same one that came before."

"Then absolutely. I'll write to them myself."

Technoblade's eyes lit up. "You will?"

It was rare that Tristan ever saw him behave so childishly. His mother only smiled fondly, clearly much more used to it than anyone else.

"Yes, Techblade, I will write to them. I'll make sure to mention you, too."

He laughed sheepishly, childish glee turning to sudden awkwardness. "No, you don't have to do that..."

"Are you scared?"

"Puffy, dear, I'm not scared of anything."

"There's no shame in loving what you love."

Still, Technoblade gestured down at himself. "Not the kind of creature you'd expect to be fond of the arts, eh?"

"Not the kind of warrior you'd expect to be lovely and huggable either," the Queen retorted, "and yet here we are."

Techno let out a gruff sigh but smiled. "You're too good to me, Captain. I need to start paying you back."

"You already have, a million times over."

The subtext was one Tristan knew he'd never get, each sentence and sentiment laid onto a carpet of a history he wasn't privy to. Even Michelle likely didn't know the full extent of it, having been too young to grasp more than a handful of snippets.

It was all part of a series of past lives neither of them openly dwelled over much anymore. Their stories had enchanted the children in their youth, but there was only so much they could tell them now that they had grown past that starry-eyed phase.

"However, your *son* on the other hand definitely owes me something." Techno shot Tristan a challenging smirk. "Don't you, Orpheus?"

"Techno, leave him alone," Puffy tutted.

But Tristan was ready to surprise them all.

"I've finished it."

His family perked up, all seemingly pleasantly surprised. His mother beamed with pride, his sister blinked at him out of curiosity, and his uncle sat back in his seat, eager.

"Well then, let's hear it."

Tristan gulped. "What, here? Now?"

"The ball starts in an hour. We've got plenty of time."

He wouldn't make him do it if he didn't want to, and Tristan knew that. Still, he was alright with it—a promise was a promise, and he intended to honour that.

As Tristan's fingers began to work the strings of his guitar, the room descended into a complete silence.

All anyone heard or cared about was his song, the skilled and beautiful notes he pulled out from memory. He composed without writing and played without thinking.

He was carried by his melody drifting on the stiff air of the chamber, spiraling around the columns, dancing with the painted flower motifs on the walls and ceilings and shining just as brightly as the colourful sun rays floating through the stained glass window.

He was six when he picked up his first instrument, quite literally picked up. Someone had forgotten their flute in a drawing room and in the search to return it, Tristan, like every other child his age, could not help but blow into it. It made a lovely, high and chiming whistle, and he had become obsessed from that moment on.

At first, he thought the flute was the only thing that would make him happy but as he looked over the rest of the instruments that existed and persuaded his mother to get him music teacher, he found love for one in particular.

The guitar. Such a shiny and curvy instrument.

It made the most beautiful sounds. It could sing love ballads as well as raunchy tavern songs. Every melody it produced could be fit for kings exactly like it could bring them down. It was the instrument of the people, whether they were rich or poor. Anyone could learn it if they had enough time on their hands to do so, and Tristan had plenty.

At the age of seven he managed to perform in front of his mother and his uncle for the first time.

At age eight he had devoured three entire songbooks and knew how to play their melodies back to back with no help, music sheets or hesitations. His music tutor—may the gods bless his soul—could do no more and retired from his duties. His mother gifted him a new, proper guitar on his birthday, made of beautiful varnished wood that shone with a sunny glare, sides engraved with intricate flower wreaths. Tristan had promised to keep it forever and never part from it.

At the age of nine, he was writing his own compositions, many of which ended up in the repertoire of the court musicians during day-to-day rounds, royal balls and festivals. He took no credit for any of it, not wanting the unwelcome attention from certain members of the Southern court, or advisors who believed that a prince of his age should already start learning how to rule instead of wasting his day away on fantasies.

When he was thirteen, he taught himself how to sing. He was still new to it and not necessarily good by his own standards, despite his mother adamantly assuring him of the contrary. He played day in and day out, and continued even as the tips of his fingers were rubbed raw or his ears began to bleed from the ceaseless parade of notes getting crammed into his brain.

He never wanted to stop. Music lifted everyone's spirits, and he knew that many members of his family needed that escape. He knew his melodies could heal any hurt when nothing else could, even if it was only temporarily.

If music be the food of love, play on.

He did indeed.

The songs themselves were rewarding, but what was even more so was seeing his mother smile.

Puffy leaned back against the window, eyes closed and sighing contently.

"This takes me back," she grinned. How far back, no one knew. "It makes me want to dance again..."

Michelle lifted her head from her mother's lap. "Why don't you, then?"

"I wouldn't be able to do it alone..."

"Then we'll dance together." Technoblade snapped his book shut and stood up. He outstretched his hand towards her. "Puffy?"

The Queen couldn't even try to hide her smile, and joined Technoblade's side. With feigned seriousness, they bowed to one another and took each

other's hands, standing still. The melody continued, but their movements did not.

"I have no idea what I'm doing," Technoblade confessed.

Puffy laughed. "So *now* you decide to tell me! You knew how to dance!"

"It's been a while. You're going to have to teach me again. Something simple, please."

"Fine. How does the polka sound?"

"Foreign and complicated."

"It's really not, look. It's quite simple; you count one, two, three, and one, two, three and one, two, three..."

She demonstrated, in perfect time with the music. Step one, two, three, and one, two, three, and...

Her hooves clicked against the tiled floor, tapping a metronomic rhythm to accompany her son's playing.

Technoblade followed her with his eyes before he did with his body. His trotters made just as much noise, although they landed heavier and slightly out of time.

Puffy continued to guide him. "One, two, three and one, two, three and one, two, three and one, two, three..."

"One, two, three, one, two, three, one, two—" He stopped dead, face scrunching up in confusion. "Something's wrong..." He brightened up again. "Wait, got it: I forgot 'and'. I'll remember next time."

They began again, Tristan still deftly plucking out his song. Concentration soon bled into pure enjoyment, and soon enjoyment into a harmony between the two as they finally found their footing.

"That's it," Puffy laughed as Technoblade grinned widely, "you've got it!"

"Great! One, two, three, and one, two... one, two... two, three..." He stopped again, this time ribbing her with an indignant grunt. "You threw me off count!"

She shook her head and teased him back fondly by stepping on his foot. "I can leave you alone if you want me to."

"Absolutely not, you're staying here. But maybe we could do this properly."

Without thinking, he went to reach a hand around her waist, then stiffened. Tristan watched as his hand flexed and trembled lightly, hovering uncertainly. The hesitation was sudden, and the prince hadn't seen Technoblade so alarmed in ages.

He cleared his throat. "May I?" he asked the Queen with a trembling whisper.

There was a breath where even Tristan's fingers faltered on his strings, although he didn't know why.

He looked at Michelle. Her eyes were glued to the scene.

"She hasn't danced like that with anyone since Pa died," she whispered to her brother.

Oh.

Tristan watched as his mother's expression glazed over with all sorts of veils, each as conflicting as the last. He could barely read them all.

But she ended up surprising them. She nodded and gave Techno a small smile.

The piglin took her in his hold, looking comically large compared to her small size. "Come on, let's do it again."

She held his free hand, and used the other to grab the hem of her dress.

Without needing to be asked, Tristan picked up where he left off in the melody and only played louder.

The celebration hadn't even started yet, but the ballroom floor was already alight and alive.

Watching his mother and his uncle dancing so brightly made him smile. Seeing them both so carefree and lively made it all almost seem like a dream, as if he was peering through a window into their youth. Technoblade had regained limitless energy, and the few silver streaks in Puffy's curls had faded back into a warm, chestnut brown and shining, healthy white.

They danced around and around, hooves and trotters flying over the tiles. It was wild and it was liberating. It made the Prince want to join them, just to share in the sweet sugar cloud of the moment. He wanted to bask in their

laughter and their grins, dance along with their fast-paced polka, to *live* like they did.

Tristan's music really could do so much more than be pretty to the ear. He could manipulate Time as easily as he could his strings.

He was tempted to start improvising a sequel to his melody, anything he could come up with just to keep the happiness going for longer. Alas, all good things had to eventually come to an end, even the music of the gods.

When the last note hit, the reality came flooding back in. Techno and Puffy parted. As the years caught up again, they panted and were even sweating a little, but still glowing. They caught their breath and laughed.

There was love there, although neither of them had ultimately admitted to it outright to Tristan's knowledge. It was far from a romance; in fact it was nothing like it. Tristan wrote love songs almost constantly and played them just as frequently. He knew the difference between each and every kind of affection there was.

This was something homely, familial almost. It ran deep, but ultimately rooted in a seed he did not know the true origin of. They loved each other as flowers loved the sun—it was necessary for them to survive, and because the gods said so. They loved each other as strongly as if blood had bound them in the same womb, because there was no way they couldn't.

It was an affection that, at its core, was written somewhere in the stars. It was meant to be with no compromise or escape on the horizon.

"Gods," the Queen breathed, still gripping onto the piglin's forearms to keep her balance, "when's the last time we danced together like that?"

"I'm pretty sure it was at the Red Banquet."

"Really? That long ago?"

He nodded, and they both scoffed in disbelief.

"You've still got it in you," she remarked.

"So have you," he replied.

Tristan leaned on his instrument, knowing he and his sister were just about to witness a beautiful conversation. These intimate little chats between their mother and uncle were always their favourites, brimming with anecdotes and nostalgia of a past they could have only dreamed of knowing more about.

If only it had lasted longer.

Boomer burst in through the ballroom doors and made a bee-line for the monarch. "Your Majesty, I'm sorry to interrupt, but you need to come quickly."

Immediately, their attention shifted.

Puffy dropped her hold on Techno and came to meet her chief advisor. He was only half dressed up in his suit, as if he was forced to do so in a frantic hurry.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"It's the West."

"What about them? What happened?"

"It's better if you see for yourself."

So they did, all four of them. All the ballroom revelries were soon abandoned and forgotten about.

The West, big surprise there.

Prince Tristan, like the rest of the Southern court, was not too fond of those particular neighbours. He came to dread the balls they were invited to, as the Western courtiers were not as subtle with their criticisms or disdain as others were. Coupled with a crown that had been regularly changing heads since long before Tristan was even born, he would often find himself purposely skirting those particular guests at gatherings when he could afford to.

Still, he would have never imagined he'd ever be so worried to see them leave so unexpectedly.

"What's going on?" the Queen demanded, surveying the chaos before them all with increasingly wide eyes.

The courtyard was buzzing, but not with celebration. It was filled with the messy panic of a rushed departure. Nobles mounted their horses and disappeared into their carriages. Saddlebags, trunks and their contents were triple checked, locked and loaded.

It was the Western King himself who came to confront them. Unlike the rest of his courtiers, he hadn't donned his evening clothes, which again begged

questions. His hand gripped the pommel of his sword, leather glove squeaking and straining over his fingers. He squared up to the Queen with indignation and a scowl that chilled them all to their bones.

"What is going on is we have finally unearthed the true colours of the Southern Lands," he spat, eyes blazing with pure hatred, "and their sham of a dynasty sitting on the throne."

He cast a glance behind him. A long, rectangular box was being loaded on top of one of the carriages, handled with intricate care that contrasted heavily with the rest of the chaos around them. The Western flag draped over it slipped. The corner of a coffin peeked out.

"Who's that?" Tristan couldn't help but ask aloud.

The King's venom sprayed his way. "Silence, boy."

His mother stepped protectively in front of him. "If you dare to talk to my son like that again—"

"You'll what? Ambush, murder me, mangle my body and leave me to rot in a clearing for the better part of two decades with no grave or proper funeral rites?"

Puffy was visibly taken aback, as they all were. It was all too specific to be a random, passing example.

Faced with their dumbfounded expressions, the Western King laughed. It was not a happy one, but one of spite and mockery, and the utmost disrespect.

"Our mercenaries, after years of searching, have finally found the remains of a certain General Corpse of the Western Lands left unburied on the South's lands. The bones have been broken beyond recognition. Only the mask and the sword were left relatively intact. Now, how would you explain that?"

Queen Puffy's shock turned to confusion, then confusion turned to anger. Each one melted and burned on her expression, twisting and turning with every word. "You sent mercenaries to search our kingdom without our permission."

He scoffed. "Would you have given it if you knew why?"

"What are you insinuating?"

"You tell me," he hummed, scowl turning into a knowing smirk.

Still, she stood her ground. "We punished him for regicide."

"You punished him?"

"The exile was his punishment. We had suspicions he had found a new employer, but we couldn't have done anything about it even if we wanted to. This was not a political attack on the West, no matter how much you want to believe it was."

"Then how would you explain his mangled remains on your own territory, hidden from view and left abandoned and unmentioned for over a decade?"

For the first time since he could remember, Tristan watched his mother fumble with her words and stutter. There was a panic in her eyes he had never seen before, so sharp and sudden everyone noticed—especially the Western King. He scoffed again, pure hatred and malice in every huff and shake of his head.

"She knows nothing about this," Techno was quick to interject, stepping forward. "I killed Corpse. This was my decision and doing alone, not the Queen's."

The monarch's venomous attention changed targets. He looked Technoblade up and down. The piglin took another step closer.

Despite what his frequent teasing implied, Tristan could not deny his uncle still had something left from his glory days—a towering stature and an imposing size. He could almost believe he had been as fantastically heroic and almighty as the running legends and rare portraits claimed he once was.

Almost.

Some things had changed enough to crack that façade ever so slightly.

"A queen who can't control or discipline her vassals." The Western King tutted, regaining his relaxed demeanour. "Still, I can hardly blame her. It must be hard to lead when her court is filled with anarchist bastards."

Technoblade's ear twitched. A growl rumbled deep in his chest. He opened his snout to say something more.

It was Puffy who stopped him. "I think you've said enough, Technoblade."

She didn't touch or even look at him. Her voice was enough, laden with a tone that made even Tristan recoil in unnatural uneasiness. It worked like a charm on Techno, who reluctantly stood down and locked his mouth shut.

"Good boy," cooed the King, then smugly glanced back at the Queen. "It seems like you can get your guard dog to obey when you want to."

"I'd advise you to take your retinue and get out of my kingdom," she replied coolly, once again as controlled and calculated as her reputation had made her out to be.

The King obliged with little more than a meager, mocking bow and a single promise; "We will meet again on the battlefield, pirate."

Queen Puffy barely even flinched. "So be it."

It was over, just like that. The conversation, and the strained, fragile peace between both nations.

Michelle stepped up to the King's side, mirroring his hostility. Her hand was gripping the pommel of her own weapon as well. "We will escort your party to the border."

"That won't be necessary."

"No, it's our *pleasure*." She dragged out the last word as if she was unsheathing a sword. "I think you need to remember where it is exactly. Can't have you or any of your beloved mercenaries getting lost on the way to your own land, now can we?"

She motioned to a nearby garrison of palace guards watching the scene with growing worry and curiosity, then to the nearest stablehand to prepare their mounts. They rode off with the Western guests once the last of the luggage had been loaded. Each rider was clad in battle armour and carrying more than one weapon.

This was the closest thing Prince Tristan had seen to war, and it had just taken place on his own doorstep.

He had heard Corpse's name before. His existence had never been kept confidential in Southern history. Everyone knew the story of the devoted Southern general who was so protective over the purity of his kingdom's monarchy that he went as far as attempting to assassinate the new Queen and the King's brother, both of bloodlines and reputations other than royal or noble. It was said that a similar plot of his to cleanse the kingdom had indirectly claimed the King's last life too.

Tristan had always grown up with mixed feelings about him. On one hand, Corpse had been the cause of his father's death, and had hated his mother and uncle enough to try and kill them too.

On the other hand, the whole story was sad. The general's love for his kingdom and its security had pushed him to see enemies wherever he went and, as soldiers were trained to do, act accordingly to rid the nation of them no matter the cost. Love turned to puritan obsession, and obsession had turned into a twisted sense of justice, as it often did.

Tristan wouldn't have known how to react if he ever met the feline one day. Everyone had believed Corpse was hiding out somewhere, living out his exile and biding his time before he struck the dynasty again—and, let's face it, the next target would have likely been the Crown Prince himself. It would have explained the almost constant guard Technoblade had over him, or the frantic worry in his mother's eyes whenever he wandered off alone for a little too long.

Well, it seemed he didn't have to worry about that anymore.

The infamous General Corpse was being carried out of the palace and the South in a coffin. The danger had been eradicated.

Mostly eradicated.

A new one loomed on the Western horizon.

Technoblade approached the Queen. "Puffy—"

"I don't want to talk to you right now." She unpinned her hair and let it fall freely around her shoulders. She turned to a nearby footman. "The ball is cancelled. Inform everyone. Those who want to stay for a day or two more may, but otherwise ask that they leave. I will convene the cabinet immediately."

"And what do I tell them if they ask why, Your Majesty?"

"The truth, and nothing but the truth."

Before she walked off, Tristan rushed to her side and held her hand. "What can I do to help?"

She cupped his cheek and smiled, or at least tried to. The prince could tell everything she did was forced.

"Attend the meeting," she replied. "Then, when your sister gets back, you and Seapeekay can run it down for her. Our military forces are going to be needed now more than ever."

A cold hand gripped his insides. "Are we at war?"

She bit her lip. "I'm not entirely sure yet..."

Neither was Tristan. Maybe the King's threat was simply an empty one made out of anger. There was always a chance he'd come to his senses once he got back over the border.

His hopeful thoughts must have been showing, because his mother was quick to dash them.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," she whispered, her thumb caressing his cheek. "I never wanted you to have to go through something like this, not yet."

He swallowed hard. "It's alright," he pushed out.

It wasn't alright, but it wasn't her fault either. It was someone else's, supposedly. He didn't want to believe it.

He tried to imagine Technoblade drenched in blood and gore, he really did, but he couldn't. This was his uncle, the gentle and old piglin who couldn't even bear to crush a fly. Sure, he made occasional quips and remarks that hinted at a different past, but Tristan knew him.

He thought he knew him.

He was *certain* he knew him.

He was taking the fall for someone else, he had to be.

Once his mother had left his side, taking the rest of the court and staff in the courtyard with her, he asked him outright: "Did you kill him?"

Techno looked lost, distant. "I avenged your father."

"Is there a difference?"

The piglin didn't reply.

"Techno, I can't believe it. This isn't you. You're not capable of something like this."

He sounded pathetic, and he knew it full well. He didn't know what else to say or how to react, or gods forbid how to get his uncle to say something, do anything.

Techno eventually glanced his way. Tristan flinched, startled. His eyes were colder than he had ever seen them before, harder than ice and just as dangerous.

"Then you don't know me at all."

Tristan finally saw it, the whole picture.

The blood and sweat of the effort running all over him. The sweet scent of the flowers the boy liked to weave into his fur was replaced by the stink and sulphuric tang of battlefield smoke and death. The soft bulk of his figure was not made of jolly fat but hard, punishing muscle. The murderous glint in eyes that had been nothing but soft and loving throughout his whole life tore right through him.

In a single second, Tristan's guardian angel became an emissary for Death herself.

He took a step back. "Maybe I don't."

He turned his back to him, which in hindsight was a bad idea. The piglin might have taken the opportunity to lunge and kill him next.

Tristan was worried he did when a heavy hand landed on his shoulder.

"You may not know me as well as you think you do," Technoblade said, gripping him hard, "but I can promise you this, Tristan: everything I have done and will do is to protect the people I care about. You're one of them, and I never want you to doubt that."

Tristan couldn't face him. Not now, and probably not for a while.

He did as his mother had asked him and attended that evening's sudden cabinet meeting. It was intense, as was to be expected, but also quite extraordinary. King Wisp of the North and the Eastern Dukes were invited to join, to the point that there seemed to be far more nobility in attendance than advisors. It went just about the way the Prince had expected it to, and he found himself paying more attention to his troubled thoughts about his uncle than he did to what was being discussed.

Those same thoughts followed him to his room and clouded above him as he paced. Eventually, he realized no amount of sorrowful meandering would be useful and instead decided to do something useful.

Now was not the time to languish in anger or frivolities.

He grabbed an old sword in favour of the jewel-encrusted blade Techno had given him on a past birthday and headed down to the barracks.

The escort battalion had returned not too long ago. He found Michelle and Seapeekay alone in the lantern-lit warmth of the guards' training ground. They were talking softly, but Tristan knew exactly what was being said.

The fox bowed his head as he drew closer. "Your Highness," he greeted.

The sudden royal respect from a close friend felt out of place too. Tristan beckoned his sister out into the open and got into a fighting stance.

"I'm ready."

He dug his heels into the beaten down sand, sinking into the footsteps of the guards who had trained there before him.

Michelle furrowed her brow at him. "Tristan?"

"You were right, I should have spent more time sparring. I want to rectify that. Teach me, please. It's more important now than ever."

His sister didn't react immediately. She shared a puzzled look with her mentor.

Seapeekay, openly admiring of the Prince's change of heart, agreed to his request with a nod and went to sit on a nearby bench.

"Whatever the Crown Prince wishes." He unsheathed the rapier inside his cane and tossed it to Michelle. "En garde, Your Highnesses."

The Prince's guitar was left abandoned for the rest of the night, and realistically would remain so for the next few as well. It would stay propped up against the ballroom wall, catching the sunlight and the eyes of all who passed, but it wouldn't sing. Neither would its owner.

The songbird, Orpheus, the Toreador—whatever number of musical nicknames his friends and family would decide to give him—traded in his music of the heavens for the clashing blades of hell. In this time of crisis he

would much rather become Achilles or Tristan of Lyonesse, the valiant knight of the Round Table from whom he had gotten his own name.

Music would be there for him no matter what. His kingdom might not, and he had to be ready.

The official declaration of war between the South and the West came at midnight.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Spreading Sickness

The West had wasted no time in making good on their promise of war.

Merely a day after the declaration, word reached the palace that the towns and villages that ran alongside the Western border were on fire. Less than ten minutes after that, a battle plan was put in place and troops crossed the realm at full speed. The attack was successfully stopped, and the South claimed their first victory.

In vengeful retaliation, they had launched their own offensive just across the Western border. Unfortunately, they were not on their own turf, and the unfamiliarity became the fateful disadvantage that had earned them a hefty loss.

For the first two weeks, that was all the war was; small, furtive stabs to each other's defenses in hopes of weakening their adversary. If it had stayed like that, then perhaps it would have all been over quickly, out of sheer boredom and the realization of how useless this bloody game of ping-pong really was.

Technoblade kept his thoughts to himself, however. Although he hated to admit it, he had caused enough trouble already. One more snarky remark or trotter out of line and Puffy might very well snap, or keel over from the added weight of worry.

Now was not the time. He'd wait and see what happened.

One month later, the South and the West were at some semblance of a stalemate, and everyone was tired of it in so many different ways.

The armies were exhausted from the near-constant fighting, to the point that dying a couple of times didn't seem as daunting as it originally was. The people were sick of the same old news, a gloom stretching over all the

streets and all the homes in the kingdom with no exception. The advisors slurred their words as they spoke, weakly waving strategies in the Queen's face and hoping for some sort of recognition. The Queen herself listened more than she talked, the bags under her eyes digging deeper into her skin by the day.

Even Technoblade, who had likely been in more battles than any other person sitting around the table, felt his whole body throb and his head droop. If he saw one more map, he'd be sick.

He was tired of seeing armies march out in the mornings and return in hearses in the evening. He was exhausted by the long meetings in the cabinet that in the end only amounted to the same things being repeated over and over again with no variety. He wanted to lie down and hibernate until it was all over.

Fat chance, but he could dream.

Only the Crown Prince seemed to have retained a sharp and focused disposition. Where others trailed off, he picked up the slack and proposed his own ideas and point of view. While others slept a few winks, he stayed awake, slaving over the endless stream of messages flying in from all four corners of their kingdom. He looked far healthier than anyone else in the realm: a true beacon of light in the darkness.

Technoblade was proud of him. He desperately wanted to tell him so, but Tristan still made it clear he didn't want to talk to him.

Fair enough, to be honest. The war afoot was almost single handedly Techno's own fault. He wouldn't be too keen to chat it up with a perpetrator either.

That was what he kept telling himself whenever his greetings or remarks fell on deaf ears. He had stopped trying after a while.

The only times they saw each other now was around the cabinet's table. Troubled times had changed many things, but the seating arrangement was not one of them, but no matter how hard Techno tried to catch his nephew's eye Tristan pretended he wasn't there. Again, he stopped trying, eventually.

Perhaps the only thing Tristan was exhausted by was his uncle's presence. It hurt to know the cause, but it also reassured Techno to know that everyone was in the same boat of tiredness in one way or another. Solidarity, no matter how unhealthy, prevailed nonetheless.

"King Wisp wants to know where he should dispatch his troops next," Boomer said.

Puffy rubbed her eyes and shook her head. "I don't know, yet... I'll get back to him soon."

"Your Majesty—"

"I'll get back to him soon," she repeated, firmer.

The North's allegiance hadn't come as too much of a surprise—the two rulers had a decent friendship going and were regular visitors at each other's courts—and had originally been welcomed with great Southern cheer. They had allies, whereas the West had none. However, when it became clear the Northern forces brought no immense advantage and in fact only balanced out the competition, the initial excitement dwindled until they were just seen as a subdivision of the Southern military.

They could have looked for other alternatives and foreign forces, but it wasn't looking good.

"The East has dropped a statement of neutrality."

Puffy blinked, startled. "Excuse me?"

"The dukedoms aren't happy that we've blocked their access to trade routes in the West. Although they don't agree with the West's actions, they've driven a wedge into our diplomatic communications until further notice."

"And has anyone tried to talk them into joining forces to speed up the conflict's resolution?"

"Our ambassador has been trying for weeks."

"And?"

"The results are disappointing, to say the least."

"Of course they are." Puffy didn't even sound surprised anymore, too drained. "Even if they succeeded in persuading a couple to join, the decision would have to be discussed among the Dukes. Then they'd have to prepare their armies and get a run down of battle plans. We don't have time."

There was no time to sleep, rest, eat or even search for new allies. There was only time for war and fighting.

Technoblade's head pounded. He raised a heavy hand to his forehead and pressed down, desperate to relieve the migraine. When that didn't work, he reached around Tristan to grab the pitcher of water. He thought it would be water.

Turns out, everyone at the table had decided to start drinking something a little stronger. The crisis really was *that* serious.

He couldn't blame them, and was in fact tempted to indulge it with them until he spotted a spot of crimson out of the corner of his eye. It certainly wasn't spiced wine.

He'd recognize that colour and metallic stench anywhere.

"Tristan," Techno coughed, leaning closer to the boy, "you're bleeding."

The Prince feigned ignoring him. The piglin drew back with a defeated sigh. The silent treatment was still going, it seemed. He tried to hide how much it hurt him.

Thankfully, however, Puffy noticed his wound too. "Tristan, what happened to your head?"

"It's fine, don't worry about it," he muttered, casting an embarrassed look to the war council in attendance. "What was that part about the East, again? Maybe we can study the response and find a way to make them reconsider."

Puffy wasn't having any of it. Right there, in front of all her advisors, she stood up and marched over to her son's side. Taking his face in her hands, she tilted it up to the light. A single spot of blood leaking through his golden brown locks was enough to make her frown. She pushed his hair out of the way, but he resisted and shook her off.

"It's just a scratch," he tried to protest yet again.

"What happened?"

"A low branch," Michelle jumped in, far too brightly and suspiciously for Technoblade's liking. The way she avoided his questioning gaze was telling too. "We got Tina to cut it back, it's all good."

Technoblade certainly didn't remember there being any bushes, let alone trees, low enough near the training ground, where it seemed the two of them had been before the meeting judging by the sand on their boots and the sweaty shirts clinging to their backs.

"Yeah, a low branch."

Tristan wasn't even *trying* to be convincing. All he seemed to want to do was just change the subject and move on.

The Captain Puffy Technoblade knew wouldn't have taken his dismissal for an answer. She would have stood her ground and pressed until her children caved in and told her the truth. Even then, she wouldn't be angry. She'd send the cabinet away, tend to the wound and talk to them softly, resolving the issue calmly and lovingly. She was good at settling problems like that.

The Queen in front of him now didn't do any of that. Exhausted eyes closed. She sighed, and went to sit down again, defeated. She seemingly had no intent on adding another battle to the growing list of ones already underway. The South couldn't take another conflict, no matter how private an affair it was.

Technoblade, however, didn't back down. Once the meeting was over, he followed Michelle and Tristan out into the corridors. He stayed at an inconspicuous distance behind them, but nevertheless managed to hang onto every word and every movement.

"I told you we should have gone and patched it up," Michelle grunted once they were alone.

"And have the healers snitch on us to Ma? Yeah, great idea."

Michelle stopped her brother in his tracks and uncovered the wound. It took all of Technoblade's self-restraint not to rush over and fuss over him too when he finally saw the injury for himself. It was definitely more than just a scratch.

The gnash on his temple was deep and stained a bright crimson. Even from afar, Technoblade would recognize the nasty work of a sword's blade anywhere.

Michelle's hand traced around it, then laced her fingers into his hair and pulled him in for a tight but worried hug. She was shaking.

"I almost killed you..."

"You didn't, though."

"That's not the point." She pulled away and put her hands firmly on his shoulders. "I can't risk you losing a life. I can't do this anymore."

Tristan stiffened. "Do what?"

"This, the intensive training."

"Why not?"

She didn't say anything for a long time. "I... Tristan, you—"

"Me? What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. You're perfect the way you are and I love you, and that's why we can't go any further with these sessions. This is not you. You're not cut out for it."

Startled, the Prince pulled away from her grasp. "Not cut out for it? You said I was improving, that I was good!"

"And I stand by that, but it's not enough. You're not skilled enough to fight in a real battle."

Tristan scoffed. "You're joking, right?"

Michelle didn't reply.

His face fell. "You're joking, right?" he repeated.

"I've lost one brother to war already. I was so young, but I remember it like it was yesterday. Sometimes, you remind me of him. He was a warrior, a general and a hero, stronger and a better fighter than some fully grown adults, and yet he still died. He was shot by a poisoned arrow. We couldn't do anything except watch him wilt until he was gone. It destroyed Ma, Pa and even Techno. It destroyed me, even if I didn't fully understand what was going on at the time. All I knew then was that my brother was never coming home. Something tells me History is going to repeat itself, and I can't let anything like that happen again. I can't lose you."

Something jolted inside Technoblade, a pang of regret and past ache slicing as swiftly and painfully as a papercut.

He shouldn't have stayed to hear any more. There were things emerging that he wished wouldn't. It would tear him apart. The mention of Tommy was merely the tip of the iceberg.

It seemed to have hit Tristan violently, just as it hit the two piglins too close to their home and heart for comfort. Except unlike them, it had plucked

something deep inside the Prince, a crooked melody played on nerves. It made him scowl.

"I'm not Tommy, and I'm not my father either," Tristan muttered, dry and cold. "Just because they were killed in battle doesn't mean I will be. I am my own person. I'm strong enough to fight."

"No, you're not," Michelle pleaded, shaking her head. "Not yet. Please, Tristan. When the final battle comes—and it will come, too soon—all hell is going to break loose, I can feel it. It's going to be the most dangerous one. Stay out of it, please, just this once. I'm begging you, just listen to me..."

Tears of desperation welled up in her single eye. Her grip tightened on him, and her trembling increased tenfold.

The ice coating the Prince's face and words thawed. "Please don't cry," he begged, hands cupping his sister's cheeks. "If you cry, I'll start crying too."

It was already too late for that. Technoblade watched, powerless, as his niece broke down in the middle of the hallway. If anyone else saw the Southern military commander in such a state, they wouldn't be kind. They would wager the war was already lost. When angels cried, there was no hope to be found.

"I never got to say goodbye to Tommy. The last conversation I had with Pa was an argument. Please don't go down the same path. I love you, please change your mind and stand down."

"Michelle—"

"Tristan, *please*."

The last time Techno had seen her as much of a mess as she was then, Sam was being entombed in the royal mausoleum. The way she shook and clawed at her brother's body, tears streaming down her cheek and matting her fur, it was as if he was already dead and gone too. She was shouting and pleading at the feet of the future ghost of her mistake, of a failure on her part. He was yet another phantom she couldn't manage to save.

"I can't stand back and watch another person I love get slaughtered."

"And I can't stand back and watch my kingdom struggle without me." Tristan's eyes were glistening. He sniffled and wiped them on his sleeve, intaking a shaky breath. "I'm sorry, I just can't."

He ran off without another word, leaving her alone. Almost alone.

Technoblade walked closer. "Michelle?"

She didn't even waste a second and ran into his arms. She asked no questions, didn't berate him or tell him off for spying. She just seemed relieved he was there in the first place, a soft rock to hold on to in the middle of a raging storm she had no shelter from.

One guardian angel needed another.

She was far past the point of being the sweet, small little baby piglin he could pick up with ease. However, she was still small enough compared to him that he could wrap his arms fully around her and tuck her into his fur, as he used to when she was a child.

Technoblade could have gone about it gently, feigned ignorance and softly asked her what was wrong. He could have, but he didn't.

Ripping off bandages was painful, but it did more good than many initially realized.

"Look at me." She did. He wiped away her tears with his thumb. "You can't protect everyone—gods know I've already tried that."

"I'm not trying to protect everyone," she stammered, with a statement that could be considered a mark of treason out of context. She didn't ask why he was eavesdropping, or what exactly he had heard. She just knew. "I'm trying to protect my brother."

"And so far, you've done wonderfully. Guardian angels can only do so much, as can we. Free will is free will."

"So you're just going to let him kill himself on the field?"

"I might have worded that rather poorly." He mulled over his answer again. "No, I won't. All I'm saying is that no matter what you do, some things will always be out of your hands. Don't knock yourself for trying, because I know you try harder than anyone."

If her brother was kin of Apollo, Michelle was favoured by Artemis. Powerful and skilled with more than just weapons and the thirst for adrenaline, she was the fierce and enchanting moon to Tristan's bright sun, magical and monumental.

After being out of their favour for so long, Technoblade had forgotten just how heavy a god's wing could weigh around young shoulders.

Michelle fought tooth and nail for everything and everyone without fail. She saw the best and tried to heal the worst in people. She had accomplished great things and would continue to do so well into the future.

However, when something went wrong, when she could do no more, she broke. She held her world together like Atlas had once held the sky, and the pressure was unimaginable. It wasn't fair that she had to carry it all alone.

Technoblade was sorry he had let her do so.

"I'll take care of all this," he promised.

He had played the role of a guardian angel for years now, willingly or not. This was him, this was his life now, his job. He would honour it to his grave.

Unfortunately only fools rushed in where angels feared to tread. In times of war, fools were a liability. Their ranks were filled with them already.

They didn't need another one.

Not yet.

People in the SMP were dying again. Not the sort of mass genocide independence wars brought along, not a massacre like bloodthirsty piglins or smiling nightmares dealt in their fearsome wake, but enough to contrast with the low mortality rate that had been installed in their long era of International peace.

Enough to concern the leaders to look into the cause. What they found sparked alarm in each and every one of them.

So when King Eret called an emergency council, the relief was almost as high as the worry.

Tubbo sat against the wall of the castle corridor, hands fumbling in his lap, eyes darting to the rest of his companions.

Bad crossed his gaze briefly before looking away. Immediately after he leaned closer to Antfrost and whispered a few words into his ear. The cat's fur bristled and his whiskers twitched. The movement was silent to Tubbo's ears, but seemingly not to Karl's. He perked up and turned in their direction.

"Look," he said, "we've just got to hope that we can find a simple solution to all this."

"Since when has anything ever been a simple solve around these parts?" Antfrost argued back.

"Since when have we ever given up so easily?" The cat hesitated. Karl continued. "The only reason this land has thrived the way it has, the only reason we're still here is because we persevered. Because no matter what gets thrown at us, we power through it. We are all stronger than anyone could ever believe—including, apparently, yourselves."

No one had any inclination to talk back. He was right after all; if they could survive Dream's terror, they could survive everything.

Right?

Satisfied with this pep talk, Karl turned his attention elsewhere until the click of an opening door dragged it back.

Ranboo stepped out of the meeting room, "Eret's ready."

Tubbo didn't feel too bad about pushing past him. Everyone else did, too.

Only Bad stopped when it was clear the enderman hybrid wasn't going to follow them inside again. "Are you coming?"

"I'm an advisor, not a leader. Right now, my skills are needed elsewhere."

The excuse didn't make any sense, especially considering when they entered the room Niki was there, sitting at the King of the Greater SMP's side.

They looked up when the rest of the ruling roster joined the table. Each greeting was silent and quick, the eagerness to get on with the meeting fuelled by a dread that darkened by the second.

"We all know why we're here today."

Eret's opening statement was met with a chorus of murmurs. Niki leaned back in her seat and exchanged a glance with Tubbo.

The King continued.

"But first I think we need to take a step back and think about our past, our present, and how they affect our future. It's our duty as the rulers of this land that, as I heard Karl point out quite rightly, is still here despite everything we've been through. We have walked through hellfire to get where we are today, to make our homes as stable and as beautiful as we can make it, and unfortunately by leaning too much into the joy we have forgotten the origins

of our heartaches. We have chosen to blind ourselves to the horrors of the past and that of these realms. Oh sure, we remember them, but they seem distant, done and dusted, confined to history pages and fading memories. We think everything is over, when it's not. We're not untouchable. Monsters can still emerge from the darkness to bite us again—we saw that with what happened in Pandora's Vault."

Niki stared at Tubbo with a questioning, intent stare. Did she know? He looked away.

"Cut the high and mighty act, Eret," Bad interrupted, waving the monarch into silence. "You're as guilty as everyone else of blissful ignorance."

"I know."

"Then stop acting like your little speech is a godsend."

"I'm just trying to make a point."

"And what will that be?"

"That we've softened, all of us. Too much. All of us except one." He turned to Niki. "You have the floor."

She stood up.

It took Tubbo a couple of seconds to adjust to the change of tone and person. In a flash, the woman he saw before him became the one he knew in L'Manberg, headstrong and determined, ready to fight. It had been a long time since he had seen her again, buried under the flour and sugar covered hands of a sweet and always smiling baker.

He held herself and spoke as if she had always been a part of the ruling crowd, as if this was her element. As if, in fact, she had headed meetings like this before—and quite a few times, at that. It was only then he realized how borderline ignorant he had been of her own life, problems and aspirations since Doomsday.

The sinking anchor of guilt wedged deep into the sea of regret filling up his stomach. The creeping water kept climbing up his body.

"I knew there was something wrong the moment I first laid eyes on the skulk," she began. "Strange alien-like plants that feed on blood never bode anything well. I tried to warn people, but most thought I was overreacting. Even some of my closest friends were hesitant to believe me—even those I trusted, like Sapnap."

At the late fireborn's mention, she put her hand on Karl's shoulder, seated mere inches away from where she stood. The Kinokian leader's own hand held it in between his palms and gave her a small, saddened smile. It was still impossible to tell what Karl was feeling whenever his fiancé's name was mentioned.

"It seemed like only the Badlands keyed in to the strange happenings, and locked their borders down until further investigation, at least for a while. Did you find anything?"

"Apart from the name?" Antfrost shook his head. "Unfortunately, no. Our herbology books aren't as up to date as they should be. We're planning on rectifying that oversight."

"Neither did we, at first. I think I speak for all of us when I say we left it alone to grow slowly but surely. We had no idea what would happen or when, so we let it bide its time. Was it left out of curiosity, or out of the simple inability to do anything about it? I think it was a bit of both. We couldn't do anything about it even if we wanted to. We couldn't rip it up, we couldn't burn it. We just had to wait. Now it's here, and it's far more serious than we thought."

"And why are you here?" Karl asked her.

It was clearly a genuine question dipped in nothing but curiosity. Tubbo was adamant Karl was physically and mentally incapable of any act or words of true cruelty and malice.

"Because I'm one of the only ones who has been consistently concerned about it," Niki replied. "This matter needs my presence as much as it does yours."

"She's also the one who brought more information about the sculk to my attention," Eret added.

"And Michael has done the same with Tubbo."

Michael?

Michael was involved?

The ram blinked at Niki, furrowing his brow. She took the hint and coughed, correcting herself.

"Or at least, we strongly advised him to."

"Niki is with us today because she's one of the best assets the realms have," Eret continued. "She knows more than us, and gods know we need to start listening to people like her more in times of crisis. We can't risk screwing up here like we did last time."

"By last time, you mean the Egg, don't you?"

The monarch of the Greater SMP didn't dare cross the Badlands' gazes. He nodded.

Bad crossed his arms and leaned back, his demon's tail whipping back and forth like a lash. "By all means, just outright say you don't trust us and are afraid we're going to muffin this all up."

"Those are your words, not mine."

"But you're itching to say them, I can tell."

"This is nothing like the Egg," Antfrost mewled.

"And how would you know?" Tubbo couldn't stop himself from butting in. Tension continued to rise teasingly slow in his chest.

The cat shot him a narrow glare. "I think I know my plants better than anyone around this table."

"Then why don't you have a cure?"

"Maybe I do."

"All of you, cut it out!"

Karl banged his cane against the floor once, then twice. All leaders piped down immediately. The Kinoko leader pursed his lips and gestured to Niki by his side.

"She wants to say something, and I think she has more than the right to. Everyone has ignored her for too long—it's time we finally listen."

"People are dying," Niki reminded them all. "They're dying. Your people are dying."

At the mention of the unfortunate citizens of the nations, the bickering finally and fully subsided. Each leader looked down at the table and across at each other, apologetic and with darkened eyes.

"One thousand have died in the Greater SMP," Eret said.

Bad and Antfrost glanced at each other. "Seven hundred for the Badlands," the demon revealed, and Tubbo could see the heartache on his face.

Karl continued; "Only twelve in Kinoko, but it's twelve too many."

Now only Snowchester remained. "Three in Snowchester," Tubbo replied. Like Karl, it was few, but a few too many already. He didn't want to see that number grow.

Niki thanked them all for their vulnerability with a nod. "This is another war we need to fight, not with blades but with unity and thought. Our weapons, for the first time in our collective History, are useless against this threat. We need to put in place a plan, and fast. Deadly plagues wait for no man."

"We're here to discuss what to do," Tubbo agreed. "We need to all sit down and actually do that."

Bad once again leaned back in his seat. "What do you propose, then?"

King Eret answered before Tubbo could. "Niki will lead a party to take care of the blooms," he said. "She knows where each patch is."

"Hannah is coming with me," she replied. "She knows plants, and she knows where to cut to disarm the sculk. We already took care of our own patch by the bakery—we can't tear up the moss itself, but we can cut the flower heads now they've finally opened, and that's the most important thing. The pollen is what carries the contagious toxins through the air."

"Fine, Hannah will go along, and we'll cut the flowers. If the sculk dies, then everything's good. If it doesn't and simply regrows decades from now, then it'll have to be a regular and necessary trim. Any more questions?"

"Kinoko and Snowchester's mortality rate are incredibly low," Antfrost remarked, his tone thankfully anything but accusatory. "Logically, since Kinoko's population is about the same size as the Badlands, the death rate should reflect that, and viruses always spread faster in closed off and tight-knight streets like Snowchester's. However, Snowchester is way up in the freezing tundra, and Kinoko's forest is a goldmine of plants and pollen of all kinds. We can safely assume that the sculk does not do well in cold climates and is mostly repelled by something in Kinoko itself. I propose to lead a research team to investigate both areas and potentially develop some semblance of a cure."

"Until then, we will introduce strict precautions and sanitary measures, just like the Old World did. Hand washing, social distancing and limited outings are just some of them. Now..."

They spent the rest of the meeting discussing possibilities, new problems, new solutions and new fear. Tubbo barely heard any of it.

Something clawed at his insides.

The creeping pool of guilt was not so anymore. The remorse had shed its skin, revealing a twisted creature underneath that had only kept rising. It grabbed all of his attention whether he liked it or not.

When they asked him for input or to agree with a point made, he did so quickly and without much thought. The first few times, in the heat of the moment and of the conversation, his quick replies were brushed aside. However, eventually, Niki began to notice something was up.

He didn't notice her gaze on him until she spoke up; "Tubbo, is everything alright?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah." He swallowed hard. The claws dug deeper into his throat. "I just need some water."

There was a table with a jug and some glasses over by the door. The ram scrambled out of his chair to reach them. The writhing creature inside of him took it as a threat. It attacked.

Tubbo coughed and coughed, and he couldn't stop. His lungs were on fire, then they were filled with living concrete and tendrils that choked and bound them to immobility. He gasped. He wretched. He fell to the floor.

With all his senses blinded by the blue he had come to hate so dearly during fits like these, he barely heard the panicked cries of shock or the footsteps rushing to his aid.

Despite the panic, only one pair of hands helped him. The rest stayed well back, fearful.

"Tubbo, can you hear me?"

He tried to lean into Niki's hands and voice, desperately so. The demon in his body fought against him fiercely. He broke out into another breathless fit of spasms and guttural retching.

"We need to get him home," Antfrost's voice echoed from a distance.

Niki quickly pressed Eret's borrowed handkerchief to his mouth as he coughed his insides out.

When she pulled it away, it was stained with cerulean blue.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: My Bee, My Boo

Sam's sudden departure from the SMP has been just that: sudden. He hadn't even gone back home to pack his bags. He left everything locked up in his mountain base, in the past, and sailed off into his future with nothing but the small effects he had on hand and a full heart.

It was all kept immaculate, a true time capsule of a genius' private life, all intact until the next soul somehow broke through the hidden door and moved in.

Ranboo had a feeling Sam wouldn't have minded if he had known it was him. He probably would have minded even less if he had known Ranboo would take it upon himself to clean it all up a little.

Every time he went back to the base, to relax he'd grab a drink—maybe a snack too—and get to work. He'd pick a box or a shelf and go through it meticulously; dusting, washing, inspecting and organizing. There was well over a decade's worth of work at the rate he was going, which was fine by him. He had spent his whole life making messes others had to clean up. At least now he could reverse the roles.

Combing through his friend's history might have been somewhat of a breach of privacy, but it calmed him. Anyway, Sam was dead and no one cared enough to go back to see what was left of him in the SMP. No one would try to stop him.

Ranboo wouldn't qualify his old friend as a hoarder, simply obsessive when it came to his passions. After living in the mountain home for a fair portion of his life now, he could comfortably say that forty percent of Sam's possessions were building and restdone materials, thirty were books and journals, another twenty percent were a treasure trove of ores, and the last ten were personal items such as clothes and presents from friends.

Ranboo treated each item with the same care and interest, no matter its perceived material value. In the end, it was all of sentimental importance—to

him, that was. He had stopped taking most harsh outside opinions into account.

Today he had uncovered a box that seemed to have been dedicated to a single project Ranboo knew well. He took great and somewhat grief-stricken delight in pulling out books and journals all filled with bird anatomy and sketches of their wings. He spread test miniatures made of scrap metal and bigger ones almost fully fledged out to their full wingspans in a semicircle before him, canvas wings and metal feathers building a flat moat between him and the rest of the world.

He was particularly enamoured with the piles of sketches. Some were watercolours outlined in fine black ink, others just drawn up with plain pencil. Some had messy notes and measurements scrawled on top and beside them, others were treated as masterpieces more than blueprints. To Ranboo, they were all beautiful.

In his hands and laid on the tiles around him were some of the last shared traces of both Sam and Philza, the remains of an animosity that had become a friendship. Scraps of History—no, *legends!*—where Daedalus made the Angel of Death fly again. It was not a real Greek Myth by any standard, probably far from Techno's own, but it was one of Ranboo's uncontested favourites.

It was just that beautiful, and that saddening. Both of them were gone. Ranboo would never hear them joke and talk over one another as they'd recount the week-long venture around the dinner table, with the complicated engineering technicalities and embarrassing anecdotes, and all the other trimmings.

The hybrid was so wrapped up in the past he barely took note of the present. It marched in through the front door with heavy steps, and stepped over the treasures big and small.

He only raised his gaze when a trotter noisily came to a halt square on top of one of the dented brace prototypes, grinding up the frame below even more.

"Michael," Ranboo grinned. "I didn't expect to see you here? Sit down, I'll make some dinner."

It wasn't everyday his son came all the way through the Nether and out into the hidden mountain glade to see him, which admittedly was quite saddening too. Ranboo would make it up to him. He'd make him his favourite meal, or as close to his favourite as he could in case he didn't have all the ingredients on hand. They'd have a good conversation and the night would be a success.

Unfortunately, though, the excitement was short lived.

"Ranboo—" the piglin began, but the hybrid cut him off.

"You don't even call me "father" anymore," he remarked with a slight smile.

"Ranboo," Michael insisted, defiant, "you need to come to Snowchester."

"Snowchester?" Ranboo scoffed, rolled his eyes, and went back to stacking the sketches. "And why would I do that?"

"Because Tubbo is sick."

"Sick?" *Sick of me, that's for sure.* He nevertheless kept his comment private. "A little cold never hurt anyone."

"No, he caught the sculk plague. He's dying."

The papers escaped his hands. Ranboo scrambled to pick them all up again, mind unable to process the words.

"Dying?" He lunged to grab one of the sketches before it drifted away into oblivion and tucked it into his arms. He looked up again. "What do you mean, dying?"

Michael's fur was wet with snot and tears. He tried to wipe it all away with the back of his hand but it all only spread more. He was trying to keep it together, Ranboo could tell, but he was gradually failing, crumbling more with each passing second. The hybrid fought the urge to leap up to his rescue, hug him, behave like the concerned parent he was; chances were he'd be brushed off like Michael had done so many times before in recent years.

"You need to come," the piglin still begged his father.

Ranboo let out a nervous laugh and averted his eyes again. "You know I can't do that."

He suddenly didn't want to look at Phil's wing braces anymore. He hurriedly shoved everything back into the box. Too bad about the cleaning. One load of dust wouldn't hurt.

Michael persisted. "Can't, or won't?"

"I don't want to cause any more problems than I already have."

"What if I told you *he* was the one who asked to see you?"

Then Ranboo would call him a liar. He almost did, if the sincerity in Michael's tearful eyes hadn't shone through as brightly as it had then.

Realization slowly trickled in as the severity of the situation finally hit him. This wasn't a joke, nor was it a ploy conjured up by a son to get his fathers to even just cross gazes again. This was real.

All too real.

"What would you do?" Michael pressed.

Ranboo would go to him. Despite everything inside him screaming for him to reconsider, that was exactly what he did.

He couldn't seem to separate himself from his heavy cloak, his sturdy armor and his dangerously sharp harpoon. He had bought them, he had worn them, he had to live with them, and he unceremoniously brought them all on his person to Snowchester.

His presence in the streets was silently hounded by the inhabitants. In times of crisis like the plague that hit the realms, the last thing they had needed to see was the sudden return of another phantom, perhaps one just as scary as the sculk currently was.

The last one who needed to see him was the one who had called for him in the first place.

The moment Michael opened the door to the cabin Ranboo hadn't called home in forever, he was struck by how utterly cold it was. The fire was roaring, but everything seemed bare and unnaturally clean. Unused, unloved in and unloved would be the way Ranboo would describe it.

Tubbo was standing by the window, wrapped up in a thick blanket. His head turned only slightly when Ranboo walked in. Even from the hidden angle, the hybrid could still see his frown. He could also just about glimpse the ram's parched, livid complexion, paper thin skin stretched oddly over his skull. It bulged where it shouldn't have and dipped in too many shadows to be healthy or marks of youth.

"Hey," Tubbo whispered hoarsely, before clearing his throat.

Ranboo nodded sharply. His own throat wouldn't be able to push anything out at all. He would stay shrouded in thick fabric, metal and silence until he was asked to leave, or until he ran out on his own accord.

He waited for any reaction, any answer at all. Tubbo said nothing. He just stared out across the snowy tundra. He didn't chase him away.

He didn't chase him away.

That was enough of a reply for him.

Ranboo rested his harpoon by the coat rack and unclipped the clasps of his cape.

He stayed for a total of five days, Tubbo's last five days. Each one was harder than the last.

The first day, he trod on eggshells. He tiptoed around the house, anxiously occupying his hands with anything that seemed even just remotely out of place. He dusted and washed, and there were moments where he could almost forget Tubbo was there. However, the ram always was, just standing there by the window, staring bleakly out across his nation.

Ranboo would see him shiver occasionally, and more than once attempted to combat it. His help was met with refusal.

"I'm fine," Tubbo would argue, shrugging off extra blankets, soup and warm washcloths alike. "I feel better."

Ranboo still tried to insist. "It's cold." He knew the ram was not feeling the fire's warmth like he was.

"I'm not cold."

Ranboo wanted to push. He should have pushed back against Tubbo's denial. Maybe it was Fate's way of offering him a chance to save the ram's life—and as usual the hybrid had been too scared to take it.

The second day, he did just that, and insisted. Big mistake.

"Leave me the fuck alone!"

Tubbo yanked the blanket away, tipped up the tray of chicken broth and threw the washcloth straight into the fire. Ranboo's tail wrapped around himself, ears flat and back hunched.

"Tubbo—"

"I don't give a damn what the fucking temperature is! I told you, I'm not fucking cold, and I'm not going to let you touch me again! Never again!"

The sharp accusation stung almost as much as his palm when Ranboo had slapped him all that time ago.

The ram's hooves hit and scraped angrily against the floor, his whole little body suddenly so full of energy. Despite a complexion that was getting frailer and sparkling eyes dimming by the day, Tubbo's furious fire was still hot enough to burn all who were unfortunate enough to be caught in its path.

Tubbo snorted; "Why the fuck did I ever ask you to come back?"

Fire fought fire. "I was wondering the same thing," Ranboo growled.

He almost walked out then. This whole thing was a mistake. If Tubbo didn't need him, then he didn't need Tubbo. It was as simple as that. Ranboo could go back to living his life in—

"Go ahead, run away. Fucking coward," Tubbo scoffed.

The scoff morphed into a cough.

He suddenly collapsed to his knees, wheezing and gasping for air. Both Michael and Ranboo helped him into bed, despite the ram fighting them all the way.

That was the last time Tubbo ever stood. He remained bedridden for the last days of his life.

The third day, to Ranboo's surprise, Tubbo began to soften. Perhaps it was because he was at a physical disadvantage now, but when he talked to them he made an effort to be polite and calm.

"I can do that," he said when Ranboo threw more wood onto the hearth. "I don't like people doing things for me."

The hybrid decided to humour him. "Why not?"

"Makes me feel guilty. I can do it, I'm strong enough. I've never done enough for others—maybe if I did, things would be different."

Ranboo swallowed hard and lit a match.

"Would they be different, Ranboo? Would it have all been better?"

He couldn't recall the last time Tubbo had said his name, let alone so gently, without the weight of resentment or disappointment dragging it down. The

hybrid, tongue-tied, could not answer. He made a noise that could be taken either way and left the ram to decipher his thoughts by himself.

Whatever Tubbo had taken the dismissive hum as, it was nothing good, as the fourth day he was oddly silent and distant.

Most of the day he lay curled up in his blankets, turned away from the world. Michael claimed he had heard him crying, although Ranboo couldn't entirely believe it.

He had thought it impossible for Tubbo to shed a tear since his heart had turned against him. The dissociation between them had extended to far more than simply avoiding each others' presence: it had gone on to poison their minds. It created hateful conversations and toxic memories that had never happened in the first place, shovelled waste into their veins and clogged the arteries of their hearts.

Ranboo decided to give him and their son the benefit of the doubt. He kept a watchful eye throughout the day.

The longer he stared at the still, unnaturally quiet form of his old friend, the heavier the gloom over his head became. The saddened silence began to affect Ranboo as much as it did Tubbo, its perpetrator. It almost felt as if the skulk was trying to choke him too. Perhaps it was—after all, he had certainly been close enough to the sickly patient for it to be contagious.

Tubbo was shivering. He still denied he was freezing with a strained whisper, throat full of mucus and tears. He refused to show both Michael and Ranboo his state, hiding his face beneath his quilt whenever they tried to take a peek. He hugged his old stuffed bee to his chest with childish protectiveness, the only soft comfort he held like he could receive in his own house.

Ranboo stayed diligently beside him all night, barely catching a wink of sleep himself.

In the dark sliver of dawn on the fifth day, Tubbo spoke.

"I'm sorry."

Ranboo thought he had misheard. "What?"

"I'm sorry." The hybrid turned to the bed, finding Tubbo awake and staring up at the ceiling. "I'm sorry for everything."

Ranboo had always taken apologies for what they were and bent to their sincerity. Forgiveness was a treat he handed out constantly, scattering it over everyone like festive petals even when he rarely received it himself.

This time he didn't. Tubbo's sorry was not enough this time around.

The ram knew that too.

"I don't expect you to forgive me."

"I wasn't going to."

"And neither was I. What I'm not sorry for is saving someone from torture he didn't deserve."

"And I'm not sorry for avenging a good friend's death."

"Eryn didn't kill Sapnap without reason."

"It would have never been good enough to warrant his three deaths, least of all in the way they were delivered."

"No, but it didn't warrant the inhumane torture you put him through either. The bloody days of Pandora's Vault were gone for good. Why did you have to bring them back?"

"Because there was no other choice."

"Wasn't there, Ranboo? Did you even search for one?"

Ranboo didn't answer. He got up from his chair and went to share a few words with Michael. He then spent ten minutes pottering around the house, washing the dishes, dusting the bookcases. He only sat back down by Tubbo's bedside when he was sure the furious heat in his head had cooled down.

If the ram had known why Ranboo had left his side, he didn't show it. He simply picked up where they had left off.

"The thing I'm sorry for above all is betraying your trust. That I have no excuse for now, and I never had back then. Regardless of what the end was, my means never justified it. I took advantage of you at your lowest point, and nothing I can ever do or say will make it right."

"Did you ever even mourn Sam?" Ranboo couldn't stop himself from asking, abrupt and cold.

"I mourned a lot of things after that night and yeah, he was one of them."

So there had been a heart in there, somewhere smothered beneath the treachery. The whole ordeal hadn't been as much of a breeze for Tubbo as Ranboo had thought.

"But I cried over you harder and longer than anything or anyone else."

Tubbo was looking at him now, with all the exhausted and livid complexion of a corpse. Parchment skin and sunken eyes strained against the little life still in him, driving them to the limits of pain and tears. A small drop of thick cerulean liquid sat at the corner of his mouth, almost bubbling in the candlelight.

He was so hauntingly spectral and no matter how much Ranboo wanted to look away, he couldn't bring himself to. Look away and Fate would be cruel. Blink and Tubbo would be gone.

"In trying to do the right thing, I lost you. I lost one of the things I love most in the world, and no justice will ever console that fact."

"You still loved me?"

"I still do. No matter how many people called you a monster, I knew it wasn't true. You are anything but a monster, even when my anger claimed otherwise."

The ball in Ranboo's throat swelled. Something he had tried to banish in vain came up to spark something in his heart, tug at his insides like a child on the hem of their parent's coat.

"I never stopped loving you either," he blurted out. Relief flooded through him, and a long denied truth soared up into the heavens. "I love you, but I don't forgive you."

Tubbo held out his hand. Ranboo took it and squeezed it.

Across the room, his easel set up on the dining table and a paintbrush in hand, Michael raised his gaze. Ranboo had figured out he had been purposely staying aside and trying to ignore them for fear of being caught in a storm, but now his attention was on them fully.

"Does this mean you're cool, now?" he asked, surprised and, dare one say, hopeful.

Ranboo hesitated, unsure what to say.

Tubbo weakly nodded. "As well as we can in such a short time."

Michael smiled, for what was the first time in ages. "Good." He got back to his work for a minute or two more, then stood up and stretched. "I'll go and see if Niki is open at this time. Maybe we can share a cake later. That will be nice."

After giving Tubbo a kiss on the forehead and exchanging a long overdue hug with Ranboo, he left.

Tubbo dragged Ranboo's attention back with a light tap on the inside of his palm.

"I trust you," he said.

"Trust me? With what?"

"Eryn and Aimsey have both built a new life in the Bowl Valley. Please tell them I'm sorry I never got to see them again, and look after them. Keep them safe. Promise me."

Ranboo stiffened. The Bowl Valley? That was closer than he had thought they'd be. He could gather some forces from the Greater SMP, he could lead an arrest party, he could fix his past mistake and avenge Herostratus properly—if he was still the Warden.

Times had changed and so had he. Breaking away from the damning duty was a hard uphill climb that felt more like a bloody battle most days, but he had persevered and he had managed quite well. The armour would stay stuck to him, but the mindset had been washed away completely.

"I promise," he vowed, and that was that.

Ranboo wasn't an idiot: Tubbo's promise was an ending of sorts, a final wish. Their reunion was far too short. Already the coughing started again, louder and uglier than before, and the ram's chest heaved with shallow breaths.

This was it.

"Ranboo, I'm scared. I don't want to leave."

"You won't," the hybrid assured him. "You'll always be right here, in the center of the world. I'll make sure of it."

"I'm scared of Death."

"If Phil loves her, there must be a good reason. She'll look after you. You'll be safe and happy."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Tubbo closed his eyes and sighed, seemingly accepting the unknown that was to come. The end.

"Say hi to Tommy, won't you?" Ranboo murmured, unsure if he was even heard anymore.

"Hold me," Tubbo murmured, reaching out towards him. "I'm cold..."

Ranboo did. He held him tighter than he had ever held anyone before, than he ever would again.

He stayed with him until the sun rose up fully behind the snowdrifts, until Snowchester woke up, and until he had dried enough of his tears to finally feel the stillness between his arms.

He tried stroking his cheek, wanting to wake him up gently. "Tubbo?"

The ram's skin was cold, colder than it had ever been. There would be no way to warm him up again.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: White Shroud

The news of Tubbo's death was met with silence. Nationwide, no one spoke a word and let the Snowchester bells ring, a mourning echo wailing from across the sea. The quiet, empty streets were even quieter.

Tubbo's history and reputation had always been as divisive as Tommy's had been, and yet still as impactful. When he spoke, he was listened to. When he died, he was mourned—perhaps more bitterly by some than others.

None as strongly as Ranboo.

No one would mourn him as strongly as Ranboo.

Their last interaction had felt rushed, incomplete, like a chapter cut for time and uncared for by the gods. Five days had never flown by so fast, and yet they were the five days Ranboo would never forget. Every silent second, every shallow breath would haunt him for the rest of his lives.

There was a time where he wondered how short the rest of his existence really would be. In the couple of days leading up to the funeral, he had half a mind to join the ram in his coffin. Only Michael's wide, teary eyes would be able to stop him.

If his son had known what he wanted to do, he never said it outright. He feigned to be preoccupied by more important matters, namely succession.

With Tubbo gone, Snowchester was thrown into the first real inside crisis it had seen during its lifetime. The snowy little settlement had always been fiercely proud of its laissez-faire attitude to politics, put in place mainly to appease the judgemental eyes of all the other nations around it. It wasn't an autocracy, it wasn't a republic. The closest appellation it could have would have been a commune, but with a relaxed leader who dealt with all the matters the people didn't want to.

The only one qualified enough had happened to be Tubbo, ex-president of L'Manberg. So when that same leader happened to die suddenly, no one knew what to do.

No one except Michael.

"I'll take his place, if the people will have me."

Snowchester was beyond grateful, but Ranboo found it hard to believe this was a willing choice.

Michael ascended into the seat of power—the rickety wooden chair at the end of their dining table—with no celebration nor jubilation. He didn't even fake a smile. He knew what position he was forcing himself into, what burdens he was going to be crowned with, and how similar mistakes had been made by similar friends and foes throughout History. He still did it anyway. He took on his new duties with a heavy heart, but traded his paintbrush for an official fountain pen with no resistance.

He also headed his father's funeral parade when it crossed the Badlands bridge and towards its final resting place. Ranboo stayed in the back, hidden and quiet. He spoke and looked at no one. He kept his gaze on the coffin and nothing but the coffin, wondering what he could have done better, how he could have changed the outcome.

He always came up empty. He found himself desperately trying to forget it all, something he used to do so easily once upon a time.

All condolences were given to Michael. None were addressed to Ranboo. Their feud had been public knowledge; the events of their last few days together not so much. As far as most were concerned, they were bitter to one another right up to the end. As far as Ranboo was concerned, he would let them think that.

He sat alone at the wake, everyone blind to his presence. It was only after a few hours, when everyone began to head home, that three people took the time to come over and talk to him.

The first of them was Niki.

He saw a pair of shoes slowly step into his lowered view, then looked up and to face the tray of baked goods gently tilted towards him. A small, saddened smile crowned the lot, yet was one of the brightest he had seen in a long time.

"You haven't eaten anything," Niki whispered.

Ranboo choked down his tears. "I'm not hungry."

"Michael told me you haven't eaten anything in a while."

That he didn't reply to.

Niki sat down beside him and took his hand. "I'm sorry."

"These things happen."

"No, I'm sorry about more than that. I'm sorry that you were forced to carry so much, I'm sorry so few stepped up to help you, and I'm sorry that no matter what you do, tragedy still finds a way."

She was so caring, so genuine, but Ranboo still shook his head.

He wanted to ask for her forgiveness for the exact same reasons. He was sorry that no one and nothing were ever enough for her either. His tongue tied when he tried, so he stayed silent.

Nemesis and Lethe, sitting side by side at a wake, alone. The rest of the Syndicate was dead or gone. They were the last remains.

"Are we holding on too tightly?"

"To what?"

"To the Syndicate."

Niki, startled, drew back a little. Hearing him say the name out loud and outright was a shock to them both. It was scary. It was liberating. They didn't need a secret bond to care for and be kind to each other.

"It was nice while it lasted, wasn't it?" Ranboo continued.

He expected Niki to take offense and leave. Instead, she stayed. Instead, she agreed with him.

"All that's left of us are memories, and sometimes trying to keep them alive as something more than that ends up making it all worse," she said. "It's just... not the same anymore. I'm not Nemesis anymore, and I can't think of you as Lethe either. You're just Ranboo and that's enough."

It had never felt so right to be himself.

Not Lethe, not the Warden, not a monster.

Ranboo.

They had both been holding on too tight.

"The Syndicate has no leader, so all decisions are to be shared between the members present. All in favour of relinquishing the Syndicate to the annals of Time and History, raise your hand."

He held up his palm.

Niki did too.

"A unanimous vote."

He rested his hand back on his knee. Despite the sadness as an era came to a close, there was still some form of triumph to be found.

They were gone, but not forgotten—and that was enough. What was one more painfully important bond laid to rest?

Perhaps they no longer had the Syndicate, but at least they had each other without it. When no one else was by their side, they would be.

Almost no one.

"How are things going with Hannah?"

Niki brightened up a little. "Good," she replied. "They've never been better. She's one of the best things to ever happen to me."

Ranboo allowed himself to smile a little. She had at least one person, and sometimes that was all one needed.

It was all Ranboo had wanted. He had come close so many times, only to be left in the dust or put in second place.

There had been a single time he had brushed the feeling. Now that was gone too, buried beside Tubbo in his coffin.

"He loved you dearly, Ranboo."

"I'm... I'm not sure that's true."

"I'm telling you it is. He loved you even when you were sure he didn't."

Ranboo quickly wiped his running nose on his sleeve. "It didn't seem like it..."

"A life with love can be tragic, but so is a life without it. You just need to decide which is worth fighting for—Tubbo did, and deep down I think you did too. You had the same answer, but were too angry at each other to share it."

"You told Puffy the same thing, once, didn't you?" Ranboo said, glancing at her. "About love, I mean."

Niki smiled. "She told you, did she?"

He shrugged. "Something like that."

It was more a case of an eavesdropping Sam who had casually brought it to his attention one day.

"And I'm glad to see she listened. We both listened."

It wasn't an accusation, not exactly. She wasn't berating him or telling him off, not exactly. It was more of an overdue reminder, one he should have listened to a long time ago.

There would be a lot of those in the times that followed, all from Niki, over a heartfelt chat, hot chocolate and a promised cookie on the house.

She helped him heal, and he couldn't be more grateful. Syndicate or not, they remained friends far past the end of their last lives.

Once Niki had left his side, someone else joined it. It was Antfrost, and there talk was far more strained.

"I... I thought I should tell you we've found a cure for the sculk."

Ranboo perked up despite himself. "Have you?"

"It's not a foolproof one... We ran some tests, tried a few things, and while it can't save a life from being claimed, it stops the sculk from spreading to the others. I was going to bring some to Snowchester, and then I found out it was too late."

"Tubbo only had one life left. It wouldn't have worked anyway."

"There was always hope that a miracle could happen." The cat fiddled with the vial in his paws, then handed it over to the hybrid. "Hang on to it anyway, just in case you or Michael need it. I wish I could do more."

Ranboo wished so too. He pocketed the little green bottle. "Thank you."

There was not much more to be said after that. The Badlands had never really meant much to him. He had often clashed heads with them during the Egg's reign more times than he would have liked to, from the evebts of the Red Banquet to his blackmail, and the belated cure just seemed like an extra fray in that rope of likability between them. He felt like sometimes he was only friendly with them outside political diplomacy for Sam's posthumous sake.

But Antfrost had his heart in the right place. In the end, all of them did, to the detriment of many. Ranboo couldn't fault them for that.

"They're still trying to find their footing, even now," Eret said to him.

Ranboo's hand tightened around the vial in his pocket. He would accidentally crush it if he wasn't careful. "I can see that."

"It took me—and everyone else—a while to trust them again too. I think they even had trouble themselves." The monarch gestured to Bad and Ant, who had since turned their condolences towards Michael. "They're good people, and you mustn't let personal bias cloud that judgement."

"I'd rather not talk about work right now," Ranboo interrupted, head down.

"Of course. I'm sorry."

Ranboo had almost wished they could talk about work. Just hours and hours of boring schedules and overdue projects. Despite his rushed dismissal of it when it came along in conversation, there had been a sliver of a moment where he thought he might be able to escape the grief. It was not so. Tubbo's absence weighed down heavier than ever. The cabin's roof was about to crash down on top of them all and while others would scream and claw their way out of the rubble, Ranboo would be more than relieved to let it suffocate him.

King Eret hugged him tight, in a sudden gesture Ranboo hadn't seen coming.

He was not embracing him as a mentor or a friend, but something more. A family member, perhaps, a parent. Someone other than what Ranboo had always perceived him to be.

"You're not alone, Ranboo."

It was too much. The dark black clothes of the wake guests were going to devour him, and not in the way he wanted.

He excused himself quickly and bolted out the door. He ran all the way across the snowy streets, into the Nether where no one would be able to stop him, out again by the Community House and all the way to the L'Manberg watchtower.

Ranboo hadn't fought for much when the funeral was being organized, and only wanted a say in one thing: the location of the burial plot. It had been unofficially decided the very same day Tommy was buried too, where part of Tubbo was already laid to rest.

Tommy's headstone had been fixed by some anonymous source, and now could be read in full:

General

TOMMY

of

L'Manberg

Our beloved hero

who

deserved happiness

And now right beside it, inscribed on a newly cut stone of polished diorite:

President

TUBBO

of

L'Manberg and Snowchester

Father, friend and fighter

to the end

Ranboo collapsed to his knees on top of the carpet of flowers laid across the overturned earth. He crushed carnations and lillies, and let his tears water the already withering roses. With his head pressed to the stone, he sobbed uncontrollably. All the tears he had been suppressing all day were allowed to freely flow, out of sight, concealed by silence and darkness.

No one would see him.

"Ranboo?"

He jumped.

Turning around, he saw two phantoms. Two phantoms of a past persona he had tried to distance himself from for the longest time. He had thought they had left, but in his last moments Tubbo had assured him of the contrary.

He noticed how Eryn shuffled discreetly in front of Aimsey, and how the bunny hybrid tightened her grip on her woven reath.

It was alright. Ranboo wasn't going to do anything. He stepped aside and let them both get closer.

The flowers were laid, prayers were whispered, and the fireborn hugged his friend tightly as they wept for the fallen ram.

Ranboo hadn't expected to see them here, but it certainly made sense in retrospect. They were there when Ranboo wasn't. They were the other side of the coin Ranboo was on, tossed regularly, his own side covered when Tubbo hadn't wanted to see him.

They weren't so different after all.

"Tubbo made me promise to look after you when he was gone," he managed to push out with some difficulty. Eryn and Aimsey turned towards him. He shook his head. "But I can't. I can't look after you. I can't look after anyone properly. I'd only put you in more danger."

"We're not asking you to," Aimsey murmured. "We wanted to say goodbye."

"But afterwards—"

"We're leaving all of this far behind," Eryn said, cold. He helped Aimsey to her feet. "Our time here is done. We have nothing."

"He said you built a life."

"He was the only thing keeping us here. Now he's gone, so will we be."

"Where will you go?"

Both pairs of eyes narrowed at his question.

"Somewhere where no one will ever find us again," Aimsey replied.

Niki's comments about his misdeeds hadn't been an accusation, but the bunny's were. More than an accusation, they were a condemnation. No matter how much time passed or how many times he bought his reputation back with good deeds, he would always be cemented by some as a monster. It hurt more than ever when it came from such a kind and friendly soul that even when Ranboo had been horrible, had stayed polite and even smiling, trying to make peace even when he waged war.

"I'm sorry."

It was overdue and it was sudden, and despite the sincerity in the deepest pits of his being he knew it would mean nothing.

Eryn's eyes burned. "Thanks, but I don't forgive you."

"Neither do I," Aimsey jumped in.

Ranboo nodded, not surprised in the least. "Well, that makes three of us."

He would stand by the fact his only justification that would be worth all he had done was avenging his friend, Sapnap. Even if that too meant nothing to anyone anymore.

"I'm glad we've come to somewhat of an understanding, at last."

Ranboo hummed in agreement. He could no longer cross their eyes. The last thing he saw of them was Aimsey's gaze turned towards him, still as damning but also just as pitying. It drove the point in even further. Ranboo felt sick.

The fireborn continued. "Tubbo was the only thing right about this place, and don't you forget it."

Ranboo wouldn't. The thought would dog him day and night for the rest of his two lives.

He didn't notice exactly when it was they left, but the moon had risen long before then. He stayed for a couple more hours by Tubbo and Tommy's graves, reflecting.

The three of them, together again, yet still so far from one another. Ranboo would welcome the day he'd be able to join them again, but until then he had Time.

Things and people still needed him, despite it all. He was loved, and he was alright. He still had a lot to answer to and a lot to achieve. It was time he stopped running back to Lady Death whenever she presented herself.

He still had lives to live, lives to change.

On that burial ground, Ranboo found his bravery again. The world faced him, and he faced it right back. He didn't run, he didn't cower.

He'd go on where others didn't get the chance to. He'd try to understand why of all people the gods chose to keep him alive, why despite everything he was lucky.

Perhaps he would never know for sure, but he would no longer shy away from trying to understand why.

When Ranboo returned to Snowchester—returned home—the guests had been gone for a while. Only Michael was still there and awake. He found him writing, seated at the dining table. He looked far too emotional for it to be official business. As the hybrid came closer, the piglin looked up.

"I wanted to tell her."

The last obstacle before they could both grieve in peace.

Ranboo pulled up a chair beside him. "Do you need help?"

Michael thought for a moment. "Yeah, I think so."

Ranboo had never written a letter of condolence before, least of all one he knew would destroy the receiver beyond reason.

He had written a lot of things, but this was not one of them. This was a more personal matter but as usual, Ranboo tried his best, no matter how hard it was.

His son lovingly held his hand all throughout.

Chapter Forty: Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again

Michelle had delivered a lot of news in her time as the Southern Land's general and captain of the royal guard—some happier, some sadder.

She never had to deliver something like this before. It would sadden, but it would also terrify beyond reason. It certainly scared her.

The letter had landed in her hands first and foremost, unopened and slightly bent from its journey to the palace. Expecting yet another message from King Wisp or news of an ambush on the front, she opened it without much thought.

Then, she read it.

She blinked, and she read it again. All the air had been knocked out of her and she collapsed back down in her chair.

Tina was the one to find her, head in her hands in the gardens, unmoving for a couple of hours. Alarmed, she wanted to know what the letter said.

She couldn't tell her. Not until she told her mother first.

The envelope between her hands weighed as heavy as her dragging feet trudging reluctantly across the halls, each step bringing her closer to the royal study. Closer to an announcement that made her want to break down and run into her mother's arms. She had been prepared for a lot of

eventualities, but this one was sudden enough to fling all that preparation against the wall and shatter it.

Once she reached the door, she took a deep breath. She didn't stall or hesitate, nor did she wait to knock and be let in. To get it out smoothly, swiftness would be key.

She turned the handle and strode in, keeping a confident spring in her step despite her trembling hands.

"Ma—"

Her voice failed her, but not from her nervousness. It was from seeing her mother hunched over the desk, hand clapped to her mouth, silently screaming in what seemed to be agony. The tear stained remains of a letter were abandoned on the floor by her hooves.

The bird who seemed to have brought was a peregrine falcon, perched on the back of a chair and watching the scene with a cold, stern curiosity. It seemed like Brian had finally kicked the bucket.

"Ma?" Michelle returned her own message to her pocket, all thoughts of it flown from her mind. She tried to run up to her mother to steady her, but Puffy twisted herself away. "What's going on? What's happening?"

Her mother didn't reply beyond another tearful gasp, not that she could even if she wanted to. She was ready to break, her flimsy hold on the edge of the desk slipping by the second. She was going to fall, and embraced the possibility.

Michelle tried to steady her again. "Ma, breathe. It's alright—"

It wasn't alright. Puffy didn't even look at her as she pushed past her daughter, haunted wet eyes wide and blind to the world. It had been the first time something like that had happened and the piglin simply stood there, shaken.

Her eyes landed on the abandoned letter on the floor.

She picked it up.

She read it.

Oh.

It took all of Michelle's strength to not crumble like her mother did.

Technoblade found out about the tragedy not from a letter nor a direct conversation, but thanks to an accidental interruption. While returning a book to the palace library, he opened the door to Michelle's voice.

"Tubbo is dead."

"Wait, what?"

"Our brother is dead."

Tristan didn't seem to understand what she was saying, shock and confusion twisting his expression whichever way they wanted to. He couldn't even truly look at Michelle for any help—she was looking away and down, two letters still balled up tightly in her palm.

"Ranboo and Michael sent Ma a letter about it," the piglin continued.

"What happened?"

"There was a plague, and he caught it." Michelle skimmed over the contents of the letter then handed it to her brother. "There was nothing anyone could do."

Tristan read the letter in silence, the death announcement of someone he had only heard of and seen adorning the walls of the memorial courtyard. He took in the news, quiet, and when he was finished sat thoughtfully in his spot, as still as a statue.

It was a while before he finally spoke again.

"I feel like I should be sadder, but I'm not. I didn't know him. We didn't write to each other, I doubt he even knew I existed. And yet..."

"Yet?"

"I still feel a hole, somewhere, deep inside. Is that normal? Is it weird?"

"It's perfectly normal," Technoblade assured him, finally stepping in. Suddenly and rudely stepping in. It made both Tristan and Michelle jump. "On the surface, Tubbo was never really an important part of my life in the SMP either, or before that. He was always Tommy's best friend, L'Manberg's last president, a friend and an enemy depending on the moment in Time in particular. We always crossed paths, just not as emotionally entwined as we

perhaps should have been—and I regret that. I feel that hole too, deep down. It's a strange one. It might be the regret."

He was rambling. That was uncalled for, and did nothing to help. He could still see that his nephew was troubled, and hunched further in on himself.

Michelle tried to catch his eyes. "Tristan, are you alright?"

The Prince looked up quickly. Too quickly. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Techno took a chance and wrapped his heavy hand over the boy's shoulder. To his surprise, for the first time in a month, he wasn't pushed away. Tristan leaned into his side for a second, then two, then hastily made up an excuse and left.

It was brief, but it was enough. Despite the tragic announcement, Technoblade felt his spirits lift just a little. Maybe he was finally embarking on the long road to forgiveness.

He then asked Michelle if he could read the letter himself. She agreed with a nod.

Technoblade honestly did not know what he was expecting. It was exactly that: a letter from Ranboo, addressed to Puffy, breaking the news of her son's final death.

He caught Michelle wiping her snout out of the corner of his eye. He tore his gaze away from Ranboo's words.

"Michelle?"

"Yeah?" She blinked up at him, her eye wet.

She couldn't fool him. "It's alright to cry."

"It seems stupid, though." She sniffled, then pushed out a forced laugh. "I didn't even know him that well. I was so young when we left the SMP, I feel all my memories of him were made through stories and recounts by others. I sometimes wonder if knowing but forgetting is actually worse than not knowing at all."

Technoblade would have made himself a hefty retirement fund if he had been given a coin for every time he has asked himself a similar question throughout his lives.

He should have been a good uncle and pressed her further—and perhaps even opened up himself—but she cut him off in his stride and handed him yet another envelope.

"Could you give this to my mother when you see her?" she asked. "I was about to do it myself, but, well, you know..."

"Of course." He took it from her and slipped it into his pocket, then turned back to her tired, exhausted self. "You need to rest."

"I need to check on the returning troops."

"No, you need to rest and grieve, no matter how undeserving you think it is."

"But—"

"I'll deal with your duties today. I'm not entirely useless."

"You should rest and grieve too."

Mourn yet another mistake he hadn't fixed? No, he wouldn't, not when he could help fix another.

"I'll be fine. You on the other hand are still young. They'll understand, because their general will only come back stronger than ever. No niece or nephew of mine should ever think they owe the world more than they already give."

Michelle would have fought him, if she still wasn't as utterly weakened by the war and the added tragedy on top of it. Technoblade escorted her back to her chambers, then made good on his promise and made the military rounds in her place.

He should have asked to do so sooner, to finally see what was going on beyond the castle walls.

When asked, Seapeekay paraphrased it into one single word: *hell*.

Technoblade expected as much, but he never truly realized how sheltered he and the rest of the cabinet had been from the thick of it. It was all very well listing the numbers of the dead and injured on paper, but seeing it for one's self was another thing entirely.

This was the kind of war Technoblade had been used to, but it was jarring after so many years away from it. Some wounds made his stomach churn as the injured soldiers were rushed to the healing ward, and blood had quickly

become more nauseous to him than anything else. The distance that had sprung between him and violence was more prominent than ever, and for once Technoblade understood how utterly normal his reactions to it now were.

He did his niece's rounds, just as he had promised, then promptly locked himself in his room for the rest of the day. He didn't come to dinner, and ignored all who came knocking at his door.

He was planning to go to bed early—at least, as early as he could for it being well past midnight—when he still realized he had the message on him.

He had a valid excuse by saying that he hadn't seen the Queen all day—no one really had. He knew however that as a matter of honesty and principle, he should deliver it. Anyway, a talk with Puffy was something he really needed right about now.

The palace halls were quiet when he poked his snout out, devoid of the usual number of guards stationed by the doorways. The South needed any fighter they could spare, and that included if it meant lightly compromising the safety of its beating heart.

It would be the perfect time for a cloaked stranger to sneak in and commit a crime. It seemed like one already had.

A shadow brushed past a chandelier, dark blue fabric billowing out and filling the width of the corridor like swirling ocean waves. A ring of silver keys hung from their hand, bouncing in time with their footsteps. Before turning the corner, they looked back. Techno instinctively took a step back into his doorway and held his breath. He could still see them, but he was sure they hadn't seen him. All he could glimpse beneath the hood of their cloak was the flash of a blue eye. It quickly disappeared as the shadow moved on.

Against his better judgement, Techno decided to follow it.

Puffy's room's door was left ajar, but he didn't veer off to knock. He kept chasing the undulating cloak instead.

Its bearer walked remarkably quietly, light and agile in their steps. Only faint taps against the tiles assured him it wasn't a ghost. Technoblade on the other hand had never considered discretion his forte. How in the world he was never spotted was beyond him, with his lumbering footsteps and his hulking silhouette. Perhaps the shadow was simply too caught up in something else to take note of their surroundings. Why should they have to worry? Their cloak blended them in perfectly with the night, and the palace was deserted. The only ones awake were locked away in the cabinet, going

over last minute battle plans and the day's log. Technoblade had only spotted the shadow because he had happened to step out of his room at the right moment.

The piglin followed in the phantom footsteps, far back enough to remain discreet but close enough to follow them closely. He followed them across the hallways, down the grand staircase and through the ballroom. Empty and shrouded in obscurity, he finally took note of the dizzying height of the ceiling and the chandelier hanging down. It was just nearly as impressive as the one that almost crushed them during the Red Banquet.

In that moment of distraction, he lost the cloaked shadow's trail. Then, he saw the cloak brush against the outside of the windows, and he picked it up again. He followed his guide out into the gardens.

Again, there were no guards, which meant there was no regular stream of light either. All they had to rely on to find their way was the white shine of the gravel paths and the flashes of the moon's reflection against the windowpanes of the orangerie.

It was strange, Technoblade soon realized, that an intruder wouldn't head straight into the woods or down to the coastline to freedom. This one seemed to be circling back towards the palace.

It was once they passed between an alley of cold and monumental sculpted angels that Technoblade finally realized where they were going, and knew for sure, without a single doubt, who the cloaked shadow truly was.

He wasn't stupid, he had already known in part, but he had wanted to be certain.

They came to the gate, which was soon opened thanks to one of the many keys in the shadow's possession. Techno stayed back until she entered and left it ajar, then snuck in himself.

The royal mausoleum was as deserted as the rest of the palace had been, but somehow even stiller. Nothing from the outside had reached between the bars of the gate, not even the wind. The air was thin, making it seem emptier than it was. The few hints of greenery were as unmoving as the dead and their stone resting places around them. Even the stars and the moon seemed darker, more distant. Their silver light barely reached inside, instead bathing the tombs and cloister arches in a cold, haunting hue that only reminded Technoblade of one thing—Death herself.

Here they were, in the heart of her domain in the living plain, caught beneath her embrace and the frozen walls that protected it. Technoblade

could think of and feel nothing else, nothing but a cloud of deep pain hanging around like a mist.

The palace bell tower struck one in the morning.

The cloaked shadow looked up briefly to catch the last chime, then pulled her attention back inside the curved walls. Her hooftsteps crunched across the dry grass, louder than they had been against the tiles, as she made her way to the aclove directly opposite the gate, one might even say that took pride of place among the rest of the burial grounds.

Technoblade ducked into a small gap between a cypress and a column, his view only slightly obscured by the midnight shadows. He watched the Queen in silence, heart already heaving once he realized what was going on.

Puffy only lowered her hood when she reached Sam's tomb.

"Hey there," she whispered.

Puffy brushed the dried rose petals and stiff lavender sprigs laid on top away, replacing the rotten bouquet with a new one. She did so almost mechanically, betraying the habit it had seemingly become over time.

She leaned down and kissed the stone above where his forehead would have been. Even from afar, Technoblade could see the spot was smoother than the rest, worn from years and years of repeated embraces.

"A lot has happened since my last visit," she said. "I'd need a whole other lifetime to comb through it all, and I don't want to. I want to escape, for once. I don't want to talk about politics or problems; I just want to be here, with you."

She traced the solemn words of honoured memory engraved into the stone lid, the hem of her cloak catching on the carvings decorating the base. Technoblade wondered how painful it must truly be, to have the love of your life sealed away from you, so close, in touching distance, imprisoned by nothing but a stone box. How Puffy ever managed to stomach the ache, he would never know.

If Philza had been buried above ground, Techno was certain he would have broken into his tomb a long time ago. Luckily, Mother Nature's mountainous ground in the tundra had been firm and unmoving. Not even Techno's grief would have been enough to shatter it, and so the avian was allowed to rest in peace beneath the snow.

All of a sudden, Puffy seemed to perk up. "I was looking through an old chest the other day, and I found this."

She rummaged around in her cloak and produced a yellowing envelope. The seal had already been broken, and when she turned it over, Technoblade could see her name written in flourished letters on the front, the only address in sight. The old paper crinkled when she opened it and removed the neatly folded pages inside.

"I haven't read it yet," she continued. "I wanted to wait until I could do so with you. I have no idea when or where I was originally meant to find it, but I have a feeling it's been long overdue, don't you?"

There was a hesitation, as if she was awaiting a reply. It never came, to no surprise, and she filled the awkward silence by reading the letter aloud.

"My dearest, Puffy. By your humble request on the night before our wedding, I have decided to write you a letter. Please ignore the fact that I got around to it two years later, we can pretend the messenger got lost. Don't think too hard about it. In all honesty, I never knew where exactly to begin. Not talking directly to my brilliant, wonderful, beautiful wife? It's painful. Paper and ink could never replace that. However, I know that there are some things that need to be written down—either because they are hard to say, because they need to be remembered and recorded, or because they need to be truly heard and taken note of by the listener. I feel like now is one of those times, because I never got to talk openly when we went to the redstone academy. My comfort was rushed, which is the worst kind of comfort in moments like this.

We have a strong and kind daughter. We took care of two incredible sons, one of which was already yours since his birth. We have a family, and we've been so unbelievably lucky to have had one which we can love and be as proud of as we are and always have been.

Some say luck only lasts so long before it runs out, and maybe that's true, but until then we will keep trying. Just because a physician says "no" one day doesn't mean they won't say "yes" the next time. No matter how many false alarms are proven so or hopes are dashed, it can only bring us closer to the light at the end of the tunnel. One day, we'll get the happy news with a smile and a "congratulations". Then we can tease Techno about becoming an uncle again. If he runs for the hills, then we can laugh. The clouds will clear eventually, I promise you.

If either one of us should doubt themselves in this situation, it should be me and me alone. Part of me was hesitant at first because I didn't know if I wanted to bring another child into the same kind of world I grew up in, but

then I remembered it's a world you are in too, and all my doubts were washed away. I want to be a father again, with you. Whatever happens, we'll go through it together. If you need to talk, if you want to especially, please do. I'm always here for you, just as you are for me. This whole adventure has been full of dark clouds, but I know there will be silver lining somewhere, at some point. And if I'm wrong, if there will be nothing but storms, then we'll brave them together.

We promised to let it flow, to not try as hard, and we will continue to do so for as long as you want. At the end of the day, this is your call, darling. You choose when you want to pick it up again and if it's too much, if you can't go on, we'll stop. I'll stand by you no matter what. You come before anything else, and I don't want you to ever forget that or believe it isn't so."

She checked the date on the letter and smiled. "You must be an oracle then, love," she said, "because our son was successfully conceived a week later. One point to you, I guess."

And the day after *that* fact, Sam had died horribly.

Puffy must have realized it too, as she swallowed hard and rushed to read on.

"I know you probably don't want to think about all that right now, and I know that. I just had to get it out while I can. A lot goes on nowadays and sometimes Time is lacking. Speaking of which, on a lighter note, the redstone experiments have been incredibly successful, although I'm sure you already knew that from the visit. But there's more! Our latest venture has involved cameras, which I'll be completely honest I haven't seen or used since my school days. You might have seen one of our engineers skulking around the palace with one in hand—without being too obvious, of course. Unofficial studies have shown that purposely posing for photographs results in unsatisfactory results. Well, the pictures have been developed, and there was one in particular I think turned out better than the rest. I asked to keep it, and I thought you should see it too."

Puffy took another break from the letter and picked up the small, thick square that had been slipped inside the envelope. She stared at it for a minute and laughed.

"That's the problem with being surrounded by official, painted portraits," she sighed, "they're far too flattering. In comparison to those we look terrible in this—but we also look real. We look alive, and that's worth all our imperfections."

Her index traced the side of the photograph and the picture it showed. Technoblade didn't need to see it to guess what it could be a snap of. The pure adoration and joy that lit up Puffy's face was telling in of itself.

She carefully lay it down beside the bouquet and picked up the letter again.

"I honestly don't know what else to write that you haven't already heard before. I am the luckiest man on earth to be able to see, speak to and love you every day without fail. Leaving with you on that galleon was one of the best decisions I ever made. I often wonder what it would have been like if I hadn't. Would we have seen each other again? What would our lives look like? Would we still be in love? Just thinking about it opens up hundreds of possibilities and if I'm being completely honest, it feels like a nightmare. Imagining a life without you feels like a betrayal, even blasphemous.

And then there's the question of the future, who knows where we'll be in five, ten years. Maybe our family will grow, maybe it'll stay as it is. Maybe some old friends will come and find us, or we'll go looking for them. The South may become the largest empire to have ever existed, or it will fall. Will we rise in triumph or crumble with it? Will I still be waking up next to you, or will we have parted ways at last? I can only answer one of those for certain, which is we will always be together.

I want you to know that no matter how near or how far I may seem, I will always be right next to you, forever. Nothing will ever part us again—no silly arguments, no traitors, not even Fate itself. No matter what, no matter where, I will find you again, or perhaps you'll find me first. You've always been the better navigator, after all. You've always been the best of us both in everything you do, and it's an unparalleled honour to know you, let alone to have married you and call you mine. I've said it a million times already, but I will say it again and again: I love you, Puffy. I love you more than I could ever put into words, and certainly more than this letter could ever fully express.

You're sitting next to me right now as I write this, bent over the harbour plans with pure passion in your penstrokes and your murmurs. You occasionally look up to ask me a question or excitedly show me a breakthrough, or even just to gaze. Your eyes have always been so pretty, darling, and I wish you'd look up a thousand times more. You're the one I chose to give my heart and soul to, and I couldn't be happier. I should wrap this up, now—I think you've started to clock on to the fact that I'm not actually working. Whoops. I'll sign off with this last request, from me this time: smile. It looks good on you. It's one of the first things I ever fell in love with, and I don't ever want to see it disappear."

She cut herself off with a choked sigh and a strained smile. The words hung in the air before tumbling down like snowflakes. Puffy held the papers a while longer, seemingly in a daze.

"With all my love, Sam," she concluded.

A deathly silence followed the letter's conclusion, one that made even Techno's fur bristle on end. He exhaled, and with it escaped the heaviness of Sam's words.

She folded them up again, returned them to their envelope, and put them beside the photograph. Her empty hands fidgeted for a moment, then went to rest back on the top of Sam's tomb—the only place they seemed to belong then and there.

"There was a time afterwards when I hated you with every fiber of my being," she suddenly admitted in a strained whisper. "If there was still some love left over, I couldn't feel it anymore and I didn't want to. I blamed you for everything, even for what you couldn't control. In my mind, you had become no better than Schlatt, leaving me alone when I needed you the most. Then I began to hate myself. Hate myself for hating you, and blame myself for everything. I still do. I keep thinking that maybe if I had been part of that search party that day, maybe things would have gone differently. Maybe I could have saved you. Maybe Tristan could have known you. I know he wants to and it's the only thing no one will be able to give him. Stories and pictures aren't enough, for him or for anyone. Wherever I go, you're both there and you're not. You're always just out of reach, and it hurts. It hurts too much. I've spent too many years fighting back tears, far too many..."

She brought her fist down into the stone. It felt like the whole mausoleum shook as she did, ready to tear in two and swallow the kingdom up whole. She bowed her head against her hand.

"Why can't the past just die? I wish I could forget you, I wish I didn't love you, but gods Sam, I do! I can't pretend I don't. I can't keep lying or pretending like this, it's eating me alive!" Her anger and disgust turned to tears as her body slumped, tears building up. "Things are getting worse by the day. Tubbo's gone, Sam. He's gone. I got the letter this morning. I never got to apologize for everything I did, for leaving him above all. He never forgave me either. He loved me, but he never forgave me, and now he never will. My son is dead, and the tunnel I've tried to push myself through all these years has finally caved in. Whatever I leave behind I leave to ruin and self-destruction, and wherever I am now follows the same path. The gods are not in our favour in this war. Technoblade is back to being seen as nothing but a bloodthirsty menace who's responsible for all this misery, Michelle is forced to head an army that she can only barely control on her own and Tristan is

going to throw himself head-first into it all without a second thought. And I'm scared. I'm scared I won't be able to stop what's to come or avoid it—exactly how I sat back and let you die. I don't know what to do. I need you. I need you..."

Her plea was undoubtedly one she had made time and time again to no avail. The stone slant laid on the top of Sam's tomb was worn down time and time again, not by Time's passage or the weather, but by the fierce, bottled storm of grief Puffy had been pouring out onto it for ages. For far longer than Technoblade had anticipated.

He finally had his answer. She didn't stomach the ache. She simply hid it away from everyone else.

Sixteen whole years alone and in pain, and Technoblade had done nothing about it.

He finally emerged from his hiding place, "Puffy."

She jumped, startled, and quickly rushed to dry her tears. "I thought you slept like a log," she sniffled, giving him a weakened smile. She pushed herself away from Sam's tomb, clearly guilty of being found in such a place, at such an hour, in such a state.

Technoblade said nothing. He came over and hugged her tightly. For a second, it seemed like she might break away from him, with the tenseness in her that often came with a rejection. Both her hands were pressed against him, ready to shove him back—but she didn't move. Her shoulders slumped, and her head dropped next to her hands, face nuzzled deep into his chest. She pulled him closer. He obliged.

The piglin felt like he was about to grind her up into dust. It felt like she wanted him to.

"I sometimes regret staying here," she mumbled into his fur.

He pulled away slightly, letting her talk and breathe freely. She sniffled. She lay her head back against him, cheek to pectoral, and cast her sore, red-ringed eyes absent-mindedly back towards the tomb. He followed her stare.

Techno finally saw the photograph for himself. Taken during what looked like a break in a portrait session in the royal atelier, the borders of the lens were partially obscured by an easel holding up a half-finished landscape and a pot of brushes. Up against the velvet red backdrop, Technoblade and Michelle were sparring with paintbrushes, their fine clothes out of place with their child-like antics. Sam watched on from a chair, dressed up just as smartly

with his ceremonial armour and hermine cape, head tilted just slightly to whisper something into his partner's ear—a joke or tease, perhaps, or a loving compliment. Puffy—a younger, happier Puffy—sat by his side, her smile brighter than all the jewels adorning her clothes and her crown.

The piglin knew which was the portrait in question this session had been for. It was hung on one of the many walls along with the many other pictures that had been painted over the years, but Technoblade had forgotten this particular moment itself. Sam seemingly hadn't dared to. He treasured it.

"Maybe I should have left when the ocean tried to pull me away again."

"And forfeit a life of happiness?" Technoblade shook his head. "I'm glad you didn't."

"Happiness that ended with tragedy."

"Perhaps, but surely the time spent before that was worth it."

"Nothing was ever worth Sam's death. Nothing, least of all my own happiness." She broke away from his embrace and gravitated back to her partner's tomb. "The day he died, my world here did too. Nothing that came afterwards was worth it. None of it at all."

"So, you wish Tristan never existed."

She abruptly turned back to him, mortified. "I love my son with all my heart. He was one of the best things to ever happen to me. I would never change that, never."

Techno managed to force out a knowing smile. "Something was worth it, then."

Visibly deeply troubled, she turned back to the stone resting place. "I sometimes do try to imagine what it would have been like had we stayed sailors," she admitted, "what would have changed if Tristan had been born and raised on the high seas. I find myself desperately wishing that was how our life went. I thought Sam and I would stay afloat forever, together."

"Did you think life would give you both the happy ending you deserve?" Techno couldn't help but ask honestly, his fury at both the gods and Fate still steadily rising. "Sailing off into the sunset and living happily ever after?"

"I was holding out hope."

He grunted. "I've learned that can do far more harm than good."

"Sometimes hope is all we have left, even if it makes us blind. It's a good blindness until it ends suddenly."

A good blindness. Techno unfortunately knew one or two things about that. A veil of one's own making that masked the harshness of reality. His own had often hid what he didn't want to see.

The orders given to the staff to not lay a single finger on the King's old desk, nor the belongings still scattered around the royal chambers. The way Puffy would nervously laugh and drink a little more—once or twice, even too much—whenever an abrupt or out of turn comment about her late partner was made over dinner or at a ball. The smile that was no longer brighter than her crown. The sharp inhale and tearful swallows that would follow the moments where Michelle or Tristan shared just a little too many habits and traits with their father. Specific days every year where she would pull back into herself and spend hours in solitude. The perfectly immaculate state of the tomb compared to the others around it, as if it had been freshly built, in a burial courtyard no one except the Queen and the groundsman had the key to.

The signs were there, and still Technoblade had done nothing at all. If his history of bloodshed wasn't enough to damn him, this would certainly be the final push.

"I didn't realize how much you were hurting." His tongue had trouble wrapping around the regretfully overdue words.

She seemed not only blind to his apology, but deaf too. "Why are you always around when these things happen?" she murmured. "Whenever someone dies or is on the verge of dying, you're somehow involved. Why?"

It was because Technoblade carried Death's touch wherever he went. He couldn't shake it no matter how hard he tried. It stuck to him like a loyal hound, walking where he walked, running where he ran. It snapped at his heels and at those of all he held dear. It was part of what made leaving things behind so easy. He couldn't tell her that.

"I don't know," he replied, "but I wish I wasn't."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. I just... It's not your fault, Techno. You've been more than good. I don't think I've thanked you enough for everything you do," she suddenly said, steering them in the opposite direction. "You have no obligations to stay as long as you have, so why did you?"

"I'm not here for the Crown. I've never been here for the Crown; I'm here because of my friends, the only family I still seem to have. I stayed because I cared for Sam and I care for you. I stayed for your daughter, and your son

too. I stayed because you've accepted me for what I am and for what I've done, and that alone merits all of my loyalty." To further his point, he dropped to a knee in front of her and pressed his forehead to her hand. "But if there comes a time you want me to leave, tell me to. Ask me to go and I will."

"And what if you still care for us if I do?"

"Then I'll carry that grief as closely as I carry Phil's."

He closed his statement along with his eyes. He awaited more retorts and questions to test the limits of his sincerity—or for the Queen to exile him to the ends of the known world.

All he got as response was a warm touch. Puffy's fingers gently ran over his scalp and down the mane of fur around his neck.

"I love you, Techno," she whispered. "Please never leave me; as long as I breathe, I need you by my side."

His forehead slipped from her hand to her stomach, nuzzling closer. It was his promise, his intimate, poignant promise he wouldn't break for the world. A younger Technoblade would have probably laughed, not only from seeing himself bow and submit so easily, but to do so for the sake of a monarch. The older one didn't care about rank or his reputation anymore. He cared about those who cared about him back.

Eventually, Puffy helped him up and he got to glimpse the sliver of a smile cross her face. It was dim, like a faint moonbeam, but it was a smile nonetheless, and a thankful one at that.

Technoblade suddenly remembered the letter in his pocket.

"Michelle asked me to give this to you."

He handed her the message.

Considering the two drastically different contents of the two two drastically different letters she had read that day, it was understandable how wary Puffy was when it came to the third. Technoblade couldn't even soothe her worry, as he too had no idea what was in it. He hadn't had the curiosity to check.

She took it carefully and took her time to open it, delaying the inevitable. She finally unfolded the page inside and read it to herself.

"The Western King has given the date and location of the next battle."

Technoblade's eyebrows knitted together. That was strange indeed. All of the others had been determined through scouts and strategic positions. Never outright through a message. It had all been unspoken, until now.

"It could be a trap," he warned her.

"I thought so too, but it can't be."

"How do you know?"

"I just do. All anyone wants now is for this war to end, for more than one reason. The South is running low on morale and able-bodied fighters, and reports say the West is running out on funds. We both need an end to it, and now we've got it. This is the last push, Techno. He doesn't need to lay a trap; it's already going to be a massacre for both sides." She crumpled the message in her fist. "Wake up the cabinet, we have work to do."

Despite claiming she wanted a different life, it was impossible to deny how swiftly she fell back into her role as Queen, heartache cast aside for the time being in favour of a level head.

She was everything. He was just the omen of dread that walked beside her.

Chapter Forty-One: Golden Armour

Technoblade had never thought wearing armour again would be so tight, so restricting.

The chestplate crushed his body back into a muscled figure, now slightly out of shape with more soft fat than hard brawn in his stomach and arms. He felt like he was being rammed into a corset. His collar guard, despite the thick fur that attempted to cushion its edges, pressed painfully into his neck, and every move he made to put it back into a more comfortable position failed miserably. The leg guards weighed down his every step, not to mention the shoulder pads that made shrugging virtually impossible. He wasn't even going to try and put on a helmet. He had gone all his lives without needing to use one, so why subject himself to it now?

Why subject himself to any of this? He was a trusted member of the cabinet, a dear friend of the monarchs and old. He didn't have to fight. No one could have forced him to, except himself.

That was exactly what had happened. Technoblade had voluntarily donned the armour and heavy burden of leading the oncoming charge.

Was this what war felt like?

What it *actually* felt like?

Not the dredge of a common occurrence, or just another Tuesday, or even a certain desensitization, but well and truly important. Well and truly *terrifying*.

There was finally weight to the notion Technoblade had molded his three lives around. He didn't like it. He didn't like the dread that made him fidget with anything his trotters touched from his sword belt to the straps of his horse's saddle, or aimlessly walk around and around the courtyard as he tried to burn it all off.

War was unfamiliar now, and to be perfectly frank he was not particularly looking forward to shaking hands with it again.

He tried to distract himself. It was hard to do when everything around him reeked with the stench of the same worry and fear. He could smell and see its effect everywhere he looked. It was only thinly veiled by the able fighters' determined expressions, and even less by their polished gear. A stormcloud hovered over all of their heads and shoulders, pushing down and down again as it slowly washed their resilience away.

The courtyard buzzed with activity of all sorts, but despite the hubbub happiness never found its place. It weaved in and out in short bursts, but ultimately always drifted away, chased by the horror of their reality.

There was a single golden ray of sun to be seen, other than the ones from up in the clear blue sky that no one paid much attention to.

He was in conversation with a stablehand Technoblade had seen sharing sweet embraces with the Prince a while back. As with most flings in one's youth, the whirlwind romance had fizzled out and became a simple friendship. It still seemed to be going strong, although before long Technoblade realized talking was not the only thing they were doing.

The stableboy adjusted the Prince's silver armour, concern evident in his expression, even more so as he handed over the reins of a nearby horse.

Tristan thanked him, beaming brightly. He held himself up with pride, the true stance of yet another hero stepping up to claim his glory. There had been so many like him before, and would be centuries afterwards.

Whatever the case, in the present, Technoblade could not let that happen.

He walked over and snatched the reins from his hands. "What do you think you're doing?"

"What does it look like?" Tristan took them back.

"A mistake." Technoblade yanked the reins away again. If they went on any longer in their game of tug of war he was sure one of them would end up under the snorting stallion's heavy hooves. "A big mistake."

"A mistake?" Tristan drew back and crossed his arms. "So you go from desperately wanting me to pick up a sword for once in my lives to call me fighting a mistake?"

"You fighting in *this* war is a mistake! You've never seen a proper battle, let alone one as important as this one."

He knew nothing about the future awaiting the Southern army out on the field. He was no oracle. All he could be certain of was that it could be nothing but carnage.

"You haven't seen how much I've improved," the boy argued.

I've seen kids like you die like this.

"Michelle taught me well."

"Well is not enough. Unless you were somehow blessed by the gods and handed all their divine powers on a silver platter in the last month or so, I'm not letting you go."

Even if he had been, the piglin would be reluctant. He called over the stableboy as Tristan stared at him, dumbfounded, and quickly urged him to lead the mount away.

"You can't do that," the boy protested.

They both knew that wasn't true. "I can do whatever I want and whatever I see fit," Technoblade retorted, knowing full well he sounded like anything but an anarchist.

Sometimes, authority was indeed a good thing when desperate times called for desperate measures.

"This is my home, these are my people. I may be their Crown Prince, but I won't let them suffer for my sake. I won't sit back miles behind the front line in luxury while they bleed for me—or worse, die. That is not the kind of ruler I want to be, and I'm not going to let innocents take the fall."

The fall of Technoblade's impulsive murder, that was. The piglin's own mistake was now costing so much in money, sweat, tears and blood. He knew that. He regretted it every time news returned to the palace from their army. He wished none of it had ever happened, but it did. He had accepted that fact and all the consequences that had come with it, but he would not let Tristan be part of that sacrifice.

"The answer is still no," he grunted. "Your mother would agree with me."

"Are you telling me not to go because you actually love and care for me," Tristan accused, "or is it because you're still guilty about what happened to my father and scared I'm going to end up like him?"

Technoblade was lost for words, unable to answer him.

It was all the Crown Prince needed to understand what deep inside his uncle meant.

"For once, I wish you'd leave him out of this," he mumbled, tone pained. "I'm not him, and I never will be."

"You're not fighting," Technoblade reiterated sternly, unwilling to venture down the path Tristan was attempting to lead him down.

"Try me."

His words were assertive, but he nevertheless turned and headed back towards the palace, shoulders slumped and feet dragging behind.

Did it hurt Technoblade to see his nephew like this?

Yes, yes it did.

Was Tristan right in his accusations?

That was a harder answer to come to terms with. Techno didn't even know himself. Both sides seemed just as plausible, just as they both seemed so abhorrently incorrect.

Was Techno really that much of a hypocrite, silently scolding all those who boiled down the Prince to his resemblance to his father, only to commit the same insult tenfold?

As much as it hurt him to admit it, it seemed so. When he wasn't comparing Tristan to his father, he compared him to his mother, and when he wasn't comparing him to his mother, somehow he would do so to Tommy or Wilbur. And when it wasn't a comparison with his personal acquaintances, it was with stories and myths—Apollo and Orpheus, sometimes even Achilles. Not even his *name* was safe, the shadow of a tragic Arthurian legend always hovering around every letter.

Tristan had never been a full person in his mind, never something other than an amalgamation of similarities. Did Technoblade love him as he should—for his own person—or did he love him for what he was pieced together by?

The truth made him retch, and he bowed his head against his horse's flank. His steed would never understand him the way Carl used to, but it was still somewhat comforting.

"Techno, are you alright?"

He raised his head. Tina drew back, fear flashing through her eyes. He quickly tried to compose himself and cleared his throat.

"Techno?" she repeated, just as wary.

"I'm fine."

"You don't have to come if you don't want to."

Not if he didn't want to—if he couldn't.

He knew that tone and he knew that look, the pitying judgement from people who deemed him unfit to fight again. They showed his ageing state to him far better than any mirror could. The once powerful Blade was no longer the young monster that had carved out his lifelong reputation, but he wasn't senile quite yet either.

He still had it in him, no matter how deep and invisible it seemed to some.

He turned to Tina. "I still remember the training sessions in Kinoko," he told her, fondness tainting every word, "and I remember you."

"You do?"

"You were a little shy, at first, but you leaned into it before long. You were one of the best fighters Kinoko Kingdom had during that battle. I've yet to meet someone with as skilled hatchet throws as yours."

Tina beamed with the excitement of a child at the praise, and tossed her handheld battle-axe from one palm to the other.

"I hope I've still got it in me," she said. "Now would be a pretty bad time to lose our skills, now wouldn't it?"

Pretty bad indeed—very bad. Lethal if it were to happen.

"You won't," he tried to assure her, taking a moment to wonder if he too was rustier than he remembered. "Some things never leave us, and our drive to fight is one of them. Trust in yourself and everything will be fine, I promise."

He felt like he was talking to the teenager she used to be rather than the adult she was now. Out of all the fighters in the SMP he had imagined he'd cross paths with, she hadn't been one of them, but it had been a pleasant surprise nonetheless.

She had thought so too, and Technoblade's light mentorship had quickly blossomed into a strong friendship. Still, he would never forget the strong, skilled young girl who's own personal thank you for his teachings had been a flower garland. He was proud of what she had become, with a peaceful life yet still hanging on to that iron will to defend her home. She had changed so much, yet had also remained the same in so many ways. She wasn't tainted, simply moulded. He was proud of her.

Maybe if he had stayed in the SMP, he would have witnessed a similar evolution with Ranboo.

No.

Stop it.

Dwelling wouldn't help him now.

"Are you sure you're okay, Techno?" she asked again, still concerned.

He rushed to compose himself and nod. "I'm fine, really. Don't worry about me."

Worry about what was to come. From experience, Technoblade knew deciding battles never ended well. There would be a victory to be sure, for

one of the sides, but it was likely the losses would not make it worth it. It would forever retain a sour taste no matter the outcome.

Needless to say, he was not looking forward to it.

There was still a while to wait, an agonizing length of time where everything was ready but the army was left to shift from foot to foot, dreading the order to march. They mulled around the courtyard aimlessly, checking their supplies for the tenth time, privately taking care of their last affairs and bidding fond farewells to loved ones they might never see again.

If they really wanted, they could all back out. They had been explicitly given the choice to, should they wish to. None of them accepted. They stayed put, they stayed loyal despite the growing fear floating around them like a foul odour. Techno could smell the stench almost constantly.

This was how it always went. Fear and doubt fought against loyalty and courage, each soldier forced to deliver their own personal battles in their minds before the real one crashed against their armour.

No matter the cause, the date, the weather, the sides, the strengths and weaknesses of each fighter, the build-up was always the same. The scene would change, but the backstage was always the most hectic.

In the end, the show always went on.

Technoblade led his horse to the gate, and waited for the velvet curtain to rise once again.

"You didn't read him the whole note, did you?"

"How do you know I didn't?"

"Because he didn't try to stop you."

"Techno knows where to draw the line," Puffy said, attempting to brush off her daughter's words.

"Not for something like this. He would never back down when it comes to this, to you."

She could feel Michelle's eyes on her as she unsheathed her trusty and aging cutlass from its scabbard. She inspected the edge of the blade, running her

finger along it. It sliced the tip of her finger, a fine red line swelling in its tracks.

The piglin's shadow grew as she shuffled closer. "Are you even listening to me?"

All Puffy could answer with was an absent-minded hum. Her weapon was still sharp after all these years, almost as if it was simply dormant, awaiting the chance to taste another war. It promised to cut well.

"Did you or did you not tell him?"

"No. Did you tell anyone else, either?"

Michelle hesitated. "I thought it best to wait and see what you'd say."

"Good. We're the only two that know about it, and I'd like it to stay that way, alright sweetheart?"

That was that. She could now take some time to mentally prepare for the battle.

"What? No, we can't *not* tell people! This is too crucial!" Michelle grabbed Puffy's hand, stopping her in her tracks as she went to dig through the wardrobe. "We have to do something!"

"We're not saying anything. Someone will end up interfering out of loyalty and worsen the situation."

"Then pull out, there's nothing stopping you! It wasn't even an order, it was a request!"

"I'll take him up on it, and that's that. If I don't agree to the duel, we'll lose the South."

"And if you do, you might die, and we'll lose the South anyway. The risk isn't worth it."

"Your father died for this kingdom, and so will I."

"You're worth more than this place."

"The land, maybe, but not more than the people. They will be the ones to suffer if I back down. I can't let that happen."

Michelle went from grabbing her arm or wrist again to placing two heavy hands on her shoulders, effectively immobilizing her in place. The eye that crossed her own was brimming with terrified tears.

"Mama," the piglin demanded, voice soft and oh so similar to what it used to be when she was a child, "are the people worth more than me?"

The question itself was childish, one might say even speckled with jealousy. It was a sharp and sudden ask, and one that left no room for dodging and weaving. It was however not a search for a truth, but rather of desperately needed reassurance.

Puffy softened. "Sweetheart, above all I'm doing this for you and your brother. You deserve a peaceful and happy life devoid of war. I couldn't give one to Tubbo or Tommy, but I've been offered a chance to give it to you two. I'm not going to pass up that opportunity; never again."

"But—"

"I'm doing this for the greater good."

"Pa did everything for the greater good as well," Michelle whispered, "and look what happened to him..."

It hadn't been the first time Puffy had heard that. It wouldn't be the last either, she was sure of it.

"Everything will work out," she promised her daughter. "It always does."

Michelle pressed against her, and there was a flash. Puffy was back in her beloved little cabin on top of Snowchester, cradling a frightened baby piglin to her chest. The rotting flesh and exposed bone slimy with the green mucus of the zombie infection had pushed the Nether piglins to hunt her down and cast her aside—but not Puffy. It only made her love her more. She promised herself she would do everything in her power to give Michelle the life and love she deserved. She promised the same thing when Foolish brought Tubbo back, and when Tommy first opened up to her about his trauma. She promised it, although it felt hard and empty, when Tristan was born too. Sam's absence had blown a hole so wide and deep her words could barely cross it, but she promised it anyway.

It was time she actively upheld those vows instead of sitting back and watching them keep themselves.

She was scared, though.

Very scared.

Too scared.

Michelle gave her a last kiss on her cheek. "Promise me it'll all work out?"

"I promise." Puffy pressed her forehead to hers. "I am so proud of you and everything you've accomplished. Our brilliant, talented and skilled daughter. I love you so much."

"I love you too."

It sounded like a goodbye.

Puffy only realized that once Michelle reluctantly left her chambers, leaving the door ajar.

She finally felt the dread pumping through her veins and making her dizzy, and overdose of worry that strived to make her utterly sick.

She glanced up at the family portrait hanging on the chimney. An artistic creation of what should have been, had Fate been kinder to them all.

The royal portrait artist had done an excellent job of shoehorning the King into the painting, seamlessly putting him back at the Queen's side. His daughter was there, as was the son he never met. Without behind the scenes context, one would assume the four of them had posed together for it.

The painting would have been the perfect message to put across to all those who would question the unity of the South after Sam's passing. Puffy didn't want it to. She had it brought into her bedchamber and mounted on the wall above the mantelpiece. That was where it belonged, close to her and in private quarters.

She had always shared her family with the world, even more so after becoming an important public figure. Was it so wrong to want to have this, a moment, no matter how untrue or fabricated, just for herself? Was it such a crime?

The eve of the last great battle she had fought, she had been loved to the heavens and back. The past night, she had been alone. Even now, she was alone.

It wouldn't stop her from trying to talk anyway.

"This is it," she whispered. Was it to the air, to the portrait, or to the gods? There was no way she'd ever know, or anyone would ever find out. "This is where it ends."

Something was going to happen, something big. She did not know what it would be for sure, but she had a good idea. Everyone did, she was sure of it. It had been written, engraved into paper and ink before the time even came.

It did not mean she would sit back and take it. She would fight until she could no more.

She grabbed her cutlass and spared a look for the green eyes hanging high above the fireplace. They seemed to be staring with a certain sadness bleeding through the pain and varnish.

"I'll see you soon, love."

A few days prior, she had made her decision. She gathered up the unused set of golden armour left on a stand she had buried far back in the wardrobe with Sam's other clothes, and took it to the palace blacksmith. She had them resize it, and at noon she donned it before riding out to meet the army waiting in the courtyard.

Silence fell as reality slipped back in. They were all finally ready to go. The cavalry mounted. The foot soldiers shuffled into formation at the rear. Servants bowed and slunk back into the sidelines, as did Seepeekay and Boomer once it had been made clear that their services too were no longer of use. They had done everything they could. Now the South's fate rested solely in the hands of their finest warriors and that of the gods.

All eyes turned to the Queen as she led her steed to the front, but all brushed the choice of armour aside in favour of bows of respect.

Only Technoblade noticed.

She settled her mount beside him, wrapping the reins tightly around her gauntlets. She tried to keep her gaze forward and her mouth shut, just until Techno turned away. He didn't. He wasn't going to until she spoke.

"We use what we can," she said, dismissively. "Even if it hurts."

Technoblade didn't press her as she had expected him to. He cleared his throat. "If I may..."

He reached over and adjusted her pauldron, brushing her curls out from beneath the metal. She let him.

"There," he hummed. "That's better."

There was still a question burning in his tone, but he had made it clear he understood it wasn't his place to ask it. He drew back, ears down and eyes forward.

She did the same.

He still said something; "Is it worth asking you to reconsider?"

Reconsider riding out, perhaps never coming back alive. She had one life left. She had lived long enough with it, it had become more familiar than many would understand.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. You?"

Technoblade remained immobile. "I don't think so, either."

They were all waiting for her and her command. She could stop this just as easily as she had got them all ready and running to the kingdom's final charge of defense. She didn't have to go through with this if she didn't want to—

"Walk on."

The rest of the army followed her lead as she rode out of the gates and down the avenues of the city beyond. The soldiers wound in her wake like a silver snake, away from the safety of their home and out towards the thunder and smoke rising in the distance.

There was no way to know who would make it back again. Perhaps none of them at all.

Chapter Forty-Two: Queen And Captain

Their troops were ambushed around midday. There had been no room to properly prepare, set up a temporary camp or even have both armies lunge forward in a magnificently choreographed charge.

No, there was none of that.

One moment Technoblade was listening to the starlings singing from the rocky crags and mulberry bushes. The next his battle-axe's blade had lopped off his first head of the day. His victim screamed, and garbled and bled away the rest of his lives in quick succession.

Thus it had begun.

What promised to be the final battle of this long and tedious war between the South and the West was well under way.

When the voices were no longer there to guide his movements, the Blood God was. Each of his steps, each of his long-forgotten fighting skills were led by a crimson wave that rushed all over the piglin.

He sliced, he diced, he cut and he flailed. He strangled and he clobbered. He gored and he ravaged. He crushed to a pulp and he tore clean apart. He made the words "massacre" and "carnage" sound cute and harmless, unworthy of the horrors he was crafting with his own two hands.

He let loose the beast buried deep inside him he had fought to successfully suppress. All that work went out the window. He cut the chain, unhooked the leash.

He was the monster of the hour, of the year, of the century.

Yet still, no one batted an eye.

Between the rest of the fighting and the shouting, dashing between smoke and fire, the rest of the armies ignored him. They had their own battles to fight, and would lose them all too easily if they paid attention to anything else but their pure and furiously pumping adrenaline. Every fighter blurred together in a frenzied rush.

All but one. A soldier frozen, fixed on his every move.

Techno recognized him immediately.

"Tristan," he growled, rushing over and shaking him by his shoulders, "I told you to stay behind!"

Technoblade wedged his shield deep into the ground, creating a makeshift barricade between them and the raging war. Once they were both ducked down safely behind it, the piglin took off the soldier's helmet.

Gone was the silver ornate armour that marked him as a royal target. He had instead traded it in for a scrappier suit with far more scratches than glimmers marring its surface. It was still him, though.

The Prince somehow looked more terrified of his uncle than he had been of the violence just missing him by inches.

"I thought the legends were joking," he gasped.

"So you came out here, risking your lives to see for yourself?"

"No! Well, not only..."

Technoblade should have gotten mad. He should have told the boy off right there and then and sent him packing back to the palace. He should have reacted any other way than the way he did.

"Yes, Tristan: this is what I've always been, nothing more and nothing less. A monster. A war machine. I'm sorry you have to finally see that."

He peeked out from behind his shield, the tip of his snout attracting the attention of a nearby Western captain. His battalion drew closer. Techno ducked back in and readied his greatsword. It wasn't going to be pretty.

"I don't believe that."

Techno faltered. "What?" He turned his head.

Tristan shook his own. "I don't believe that."

"Then you're blind."

"And you're too hard on yourself."

Technoblade's whole body was practically drenched in blood and grime. The arsenal of weapons strapped to his waist and back each had claimed more than five lives each so far. In the distorted reflection of his shield's metal lining, he could see the crazed stare in his eyes, bloodshot and bulging. Saliva dripped out of his panting mouth, foaming like rabies.

Too hard on himself? Not at all. If anything he had been unjustly generous with his description.

"Techno, if you were a monster, I wouldn't see you as a father."

The piglin almost dropped his sword entirely. Looking back at Tristan, he saw nothing but a stern honesty staring back at him.

"I never met my father, and perhaps I never will. I've accepted that and although I'll always wonder what could have been, you've filled his place better than you could ever know. You helped make me what I am. You've loved and raised me alongside my mother, and I wouldn't have it any other way. When I found out about Corpse, I stayed away from you because I had never thought you'd do something like that. Now I know you can, but I also know you only did it to protect us. You're not a monster. You're a guardian."

Techno would have said something, had his vocal chords wanted to work. Had he been even just somewhat able to find the words or make himself believe the reassurance he was given.

The running footsteps drew closer and closer.

To Techno's shock, Tristan suddenly stood up. In one swift move, he slung his bow off his back, readied an arrow, pulled back the string and fired.

The enemy captain fell to the earth, the projectile nestled deep into his neck. A few more soldiers were shot down in quick succession with the same perfect accuracy, tripping up their comrades in their stride. The rest of the small battalion stared at their commander's body in horror and scattered.

Tristan turned back to his uncle, grinning proudly. The bow was still clutched tightly in his fist, shining with the same sunny glow in his presence as his guitar did. It looked just as snug in his hold, too. He victoriously plucked the taut string, pulling out a beautiful note.

"Didn't count for archery, huh?" the boy laughed. "I know my way around strings."

Technoblade yanked him back behind his shield just as a rain of enemy arrows poured down in retaliation.

"You're just like your father," he grunted with a tut as he forced him back down, knees digging deep into the trembling earth, "you two will fight well with anything but a good old sword or axe."

His sharp remark would have been taken by anyone else as an offense. Tristan was not everyone else.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Technoblade suddenly didn't see Sam when he looked at him.

He saw Tristan, and nothing but him.

His heart swelled with affection and he brought the boy tightly into his arms.

Startled by the sudden squeeze, Tristan let out a small squeal, only to then melt into the piglin's arms once it was made clear he wasn't going to let go of him anytime soon.

"You're so stupidly brave," he grunted.

He was aware just how much blood he was getting on his nephew, but he couldn't care less. Tristan didn't seem to mind either. He embraced the piglin back with all his might, making up for all the affection that had been lacking between them recently.

Blood soaked or not, the boy still loved him. It was a strangely wonderful feeling.

"Tristan? My gods, what are you doing here?"

Someone else joined them, immediately pulling Tristan out of Techno's arms. Puffy immediately began to fuss over him, shock still apparent on her features as she scrutinized his face for any signs of harm or even dirt.

He tried to protest her concern; "I'm fine—"

"What on earth possessed you to come along? You could get yourself killed, and for what? You should have stayed home!"

He looked truly apologetic. "I'm sorry, Ma. I just wanted to help..."

Her blue stare, still concerned, only hardened. "You *should* be sorry. You're not going to help anyone if you get yourself killed. You haven't had any proper training—"

"I have, actually," he jumped in.

"He's more than decent with a bow," Technoblade felt morally obligated to note as well. The praise earned him a surprised glance from Tristan. "He can hold his own pretty well."

Puffy looked from Technoblade back to her son. She took in both their gazes, both their words and their determination gushing out like a shared torrent. She still seemed hesitant.

"I don't like this any more than you do," Techno eventually said, "but it's better to have him stay here with us instead of sending him back home on his own. Who knows what traps or ambushes the West has set up on the way back to the palace?"

"I don't want to go back," Tristan continued in turn. "I want to fight for my home. You've both had so many adventures and journeys, so many friends and loved ones you've met and lost. You've had many homes. I haven't. This is the only one I've got, and I want to keep it. I want to fight for it. Please."

The argument was addressed to Technoblade just as it was addressed to the Queen. It was challenging them, daring them to try and stop him. Techno had already lost that fight, and had accepted defeat.

Eventually, with some difficulty, Puffy too relented.

"Stick to the vantage points, try not to engage on the ground or with your sword. Always stay in your sister's sights, make sure she knows where you are. Look out for each other."

"Okay."

"I'm serious, Tristan."

He nodded with a hard, determined stare. "I promise."

She quickly pressed her lips to his forehead. "Go get them, sweetheart."

He lingered for a moment longer, just long enough to give his mother a hug back. When he pulled away, Techno noticed how Puffy's body followed him. Chased him, almost. Wanted to make it last.

The Prince peeked out from behind the shield and readied an arrow. He waited, he waited, and when apparently the time was right, he leapt out, fired it, and disappeared into the melee.

There was no time to run in after him, apparently. At least, not for Puffy herself to do so.

Once her son had left their side, her attention shifted to something further away across the battlefield. Her pride devolved into a hard stare.

"Don't follow me, Techno."

He blinked, startled. "What?"

"Whatever you do, don't follow me."

She set off.

He didn't listen.

She was well ahead of him, and he made sure to keep it that way. He stayed far enough behind her, only stopping to deal with a few more Western soldiers who had been dumb enough to think they could take him on, but always keeping Puffy in his sights.

To his surprise, he found her heading away from the battlefield, over the hillocks that split the moors from the shoreline. She continued down the side of a gully, heading further and further away from all the fighting between the two kingdoms back above. No one seemed to notice her absence besides Technoblade.

He stood at the edge of the drop for a while, simply watching. Puffy's steps across the sand of the bay below were slow, slower than they should have been, slower than she usually was in her element. She dragged them, leaving behind deep tracks behind her.

Someone else was already there, waiting down on the golden ground. He wore a heavy cloak cut from the finest Western silk Technoblade had ever seen, and a suit of dark armour that doubled the size of his frame. His kingdom's crown was set high upon his brow, a vain choice considering the ferocity of the battle raging on beyond.

Neither monarch drew their weapon. The Western King simply waited until the Southern Queen joined him, shook her hand, and wordlessly led her down to the water's ledge. They followed it to the end of the bay, and disappeared behind some slimy boulders.

Technoblade followed.

The descent was treacherous, but not impossible. If he wasn't rushing as erratically as he was, it would even be a pleasant journey. He went down, down into the confines of the bay. The stench of brine welled up in his snout, rolling and crashing like uncomfortable waves. It felt like they were trying to drown him in the air just as easily as the sea could do so in its waters. He pressed on, despite sinking into the wet sand with every heavy step. If he fell he'd be left for dead. It would be impossible for him to pull himself out even with his beastial strength.

He eventually made it to the same rocks both monarchs had disappeared behind, throwing himself against them if only to steady himself. He froze

when he began to hear voices. He ducked between the slimy boulders and shuffled forward. From his shadowy nook between two rocks, he could just about see the scene before him.

The sandy trail the King and the Queen had taken led around to a cave, gaping mouth open to the ocean and its gullet stretching far enough back into the cliff to clear a sizable, wet room. It would be the perfect hideout for smugglers, or for any other highly secretive activities. That was probably why it had been chosen.

Puffy stood to the side, close to the trail. Her posture was clean and confident, but Technoblade still noticed her gauntlets tighten awkwardly around the hilt of her cutlass.

The Western King on the other hand seemed blissfully unbothered and unworried. He strode to one of the walls and unclipped his cloak, dropping it to the floor. He laid his crown on top, fondly caressing the amber and ruby gems inset into the gold.

It only occurred to Technoblade then that neither of them knew the King's real name. He was always referred to by his title and that of his kingdom, and more often than not by a choice of more or less creative insults crafted by the Southern Court. Perhaps that made it easier to wish Death's kiss upon him, and harder to feel remorse when it would happen.

Still, he could not understand why a King so stuck on fighting a war was here, away from it, and with the Southern Queen joining him seemingly willingly.

Puffy's face was impassive, betraying no look of surprise or confusion. She merely stood, waiting until he turned back to her.

When he did, he was smiling. "I didn't expect you to accept."

She shrugged. "Neither did I."

"We could both back out of this if we wanted to. After all, why should *we* fight when we have whole armies who would wish nothing more than to die for us?"

"Because it's wrong."

A pitiful reply at best, but Puffy didn't seem to care. She only seemed impatient to get whatever all this was about over and done with.

It still gave the King a good laugh. "Lots of things are wrong in this world, and yet we do them anyway. Why should waging a war be any different?"

"I have fought in more battles than you could possibly imagine," she replied. "This is the first war I can end with my own two hands, and by two hands alone. I'm not going to pass it up."

"Wise words, but foolish ones. I don't think you realize how many wars I've fought in myself, let alone headed for my country. I was given the crown for a reason."

"I wouldn't call a coup being 'given' the crown."

He scoffed. "Don't speak about matters you know nothing about."

He looked at her up and down. Technoblade could almost see a storm of wit and deprecation rolling in his mouth, just waiting to unleash its hurtful wrath upon her. It never came.

"I've seen that armour before," the King noted. "A long time ago. It's not yours, is it?"

"That's none of your business," she spat back.

He grinned, his question answered nonetheless. "I admire your devotion to the dead," he remarked. He drew his sword. "Let's hope for your sake what will be left of your people will do the same."

Puffy drew her own. They saluted each other, and Technoblade finally realized what was going on.

A duel.

And even more likely, one to the final death.

The King lunged first, footsteps surprisingly light and skilled for his height and muscle. His sword came crashing down on sand, stone and very nearly Puffy's own head. She stopped it at the last second and pushed his blade to the side, just long enough to jump out of the way. He rose back to his feet in no time, and in horror Technoblade realized how competent a warrior he truly was.

Both monarchs were evenly matched. It was about to be a bloodbath.

That was why Puffy didn't want Techno to follow her. She knew what was to come.

The piglin should have made his presence known and killed the King right there and then. He could do it so easily.

He couldn't move. Something kept him pinned to his spot, godly hands preventing him from rushing forward and dealing with it all himself.

Blades crossed and clashed in a dance of Death that seemed almost choreographed. It was beautiful and precise in all the most macabre ways. He could watch it for hours, in a dark and twisted way he didn't like. It was mortifying, but it kept his attention.

It was like watching two shadows intertwine and tear at each other with the ferocity of monsters, the shine of blood and sweat and glistening armour casting solemn starry lights across the walls of the cavern. The waters outside the entrance tried to crash in and help, only to be held back by the maze of jagged points barring the entrance like crooked teeth. The two crowns were left to duke it out alone.

Puffy had lost none of her agility and drive throughout the years, and still fought with shockingly youthful energy. Unfortunately, it seemed neither had the Western King. Whenever she got the upper hand, he was quick to snatch it back, and vice-versa. It was never-ending, almost akin to two snakes biting the end of each others' tails in a loop.

The vicious cycle of violence had a clear beginning, but no true end in sight. It all seemed to drag out far longer than it intended to.

That was, until Puffy was pinned to the floor by a heavy boot.

"Such a shame," tutted the Western King, gliding the flat of his blade underneath her chin, "we could have been marvellous friends, you and I, perhaps even more. Our two kingdoms could have been joined as one under one crown."

"I would rather die," she bit back, spitting in his face.

"Well that's ironic, isn't it? It'll be quick, I promise." He readied the striking blow, then paused. He tilted his head and gave her a warm smile. "You know, you mustn't worry about the South when you're gone. I'm not a cruel ruler; I know how to look after a good place. I'd flush out the problems, of course, all those who are too foolish to accept defeat and join me. Your anarchist lap-pig, for instance, and as much as I hate to admit it, your daughter doesn't seem like the kind of woman to want to sit and discuss her dead mother's legacy politely either. As for your son, well, that'll all depend on how much of his father's common sense he's inherited. I will have no qualms slitting his throat too if the need comes to be."

Something snapped inside Puffy. In a risky move that made even Technoblade flinch, she drew both of her legs back and kicked the King in the stomach—hard. Her hooves pushed him back just far enough for her to scramble to her feet again, grab her cutlass, and ram head-first into him.

The impact sent him crashing into the back wall, cracking his head open on the slimy rock. He flailed his sword around blindly, slicing her twice across the stomach. She bleated in pain, but held strong. She pressed against him, point to his neck.

"You don't have the guts to kill me," he spluttered, his laugh viscous and wet with sweat and blood.

Technoblade knew she did.

She thrust her cutlass forward.

The King choked. Dark eyes rolled back into their sockets, showing nothing but white. He gasped and tried to inhale what little air he could. It was all in vain.

Puffy pulled her cutlass from the King's throat. It slid out easily, leaving a gushing mess behind. The gargling stopped. The blood continued to flow. It streamed down his front, polished armour now tarnished, and with its force dragged the rest of the King's corpse down with it. He slumped down against the wall and toppled head-first into the ground. His own fluids cushioned his landing with a stomach-churning splat.

That was the last sound either of them heard for a while. Puffy did not move, simply staring at the masterpiece of her carnage with increasingly narrowing eyes and increasingly ragged breath.

Then, she sighed in relief.

She looked down.

The hilt of a sword protruded out from her hip. The blade had left a deep, dark gnash in its wake, blood beginning well up and dripping from beneath her armour.

She stared at it for a while, almost in morbid fascination, then put her hand on it and pulled. The Western King's sword slid out just as easily as her own. She cast both aside carelessly. Their red, dripping blades sank into the sandy ground.

She staggered forwards. She lost her footing, her hoof knocking against a particularly big rock. She swayed in place for a moment or two.

She fell.

The second Puffy collapsed, Technoblade leapt out of the shadows.

"Puffy!

He rushed to her side, lifting her carefully onto his knees. She gasped and balled her fists into the fur she could reach. Her fingers tightened around him like vices, yanking and tugging at him as if he was made of fabric, a large stuffed toy to pry and prod at and tear apart in anguish.

He stared at her wound for quite a while, or at least what he could see of it. Streams of blood trickled out from beneath the armoured plates, desperately trying to hide the damage. Techno could only imagine what it looked like underneath; a large hole gaping like a well of flesh.

He could imagine, but just barely. The image was fogged around the edges, drifting in and out of reality. What his eyes saw cut off from his mind entirely. He felt nothing. Nothing at all.

His hands drifted round the back of her head, nails catching on the weaves of the long braid running down her back. It looked tight, too tight. It was a miracle she wasn't complaining of a headache. He got to work loosening her curls, softly running his hand through her hair until it all fell back to its natural state, bouncy and curling over her shoulders. The ribbon fell to the floor, pressed by the edge of the piglin's knee into the wet sand.

He brushed one or two locks out of her eyes, and despite himself he smiled. "There we go."

"I'm... I'm sorry," she whimpered. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about this—Michelle was right, I should have said something. I should have—"

She cut herself off and winced. He continued to stroke her hair.

Beside them, the Western King's body continued to bleed out. Crimson swirled with salt and sand, the strange concoction it formed slowly making its way down to the mouth of the cave. The ocean waves lapped at a couple of drops, but ultimately refused to taste any more. Not even the sea wanted to touch the dead tyrant.

On the contrary, it was creeping closer to Puffy as she lay there, huddled in Technoblade's arms. She seemed to notice it out of the corner of her eye, and she tapped his shoulder.

He got the message and, trying desperately not to hurt her any more, he shuffled them both backwards, away from the waves.

"I would have tried to stop you if I'd known," he told her.

"That's exactly what I didn't want."

Realization dawned on him. "You wanted to die."

"No, but I knew I would."

"No one can know anything like that."

"Believe me, Techno, I did. Something shifted and I felt it. Nothing could have prevented it, all I could do was—"

She cut herself off with a sharp intake of breath. Perhaps it was just a trick of Techno's eyes, but the blood seemed to trickle faster.

"Hey, hey... Take it easy."

He tried to dull the gritted edges of his voice to something softer that wouldn't feel like it would cut her deeper. It ended up sounding like pounding rain, hard and dull on impact. Comforting to some, terrifying to others. It could make them cozy up by a warm fire or hide under the covers. It drenched whoever's ears it fell on.

"Save your strength. We'll get you out of here soon."

He could take her out of there right now, in fact. He had the strength, he had a very good reason to. Still, his knees did not seem to want to budge, keeping him firmly anchored into the sand. No one would hear them scream. That was the point of the duel's location.

What happened in there was meant to stay in there, unless someone stumbled across it. Technoblade was that someone, yet he still couldn't move.

Puffy's reply only confirmed his theory. "I'm alright here," she said, her hand gently resting against the piglin's cheek. "Just hold me."

He wouldn't dream of doing anything else. "We need to get you out of here."

She let out a weakened laugh. "A bit of sea mist can hardly hurt me now."

It wasn't sea mist. The ocean couldn't reach them as far back against the cave wall as they were. The only liquid in sight was the crimson staining the golden armour and streaming down in water pressed patterns in the sand to the edge of the brine. All that touched her was blood. Techno resisted the urge to beckon the waves closer to wash it all away.

He still couldn't see her wounds, but he could now properly imagine them. He could imagine them *very* well and didn't need to ask to remove the placard or the faulds to know he was right.

He held her like he had held Sam all those years ago, stomach open and draining their last lives away. Even if Puffy was still breathing, he could do nothing to help her. Everything seemed to be stopping him, one might even say on her side.

"You're going to live, Puffy, dear gods above," he promised, his voice cracking.

"That's not how it works—"

"You have so much good left to do you can't leave."

"Whether I lived for a hundred years or another minute, it wouldn't make a difference. I've done a lot with my time, more than anyone else would have done. It's fine."

"Sam should have been here to deal with this duel in your place."

Now she seemed offended, eyes narrowed and lips pursed. "I can take care of my own business."

"But Sam would—"

"Don't. Stop."

She winced and hissed in pain, but somehow still found enough fight in her to go on.

"I loved and always will love him, but I'm not and never will be solely an extension of his character, just as he wasn't one of mine. Don't make that all everyone will ever think of us. I know some already do. We were people, Techno, full people that did not boil down exclusively to wedding bands. I know how much you hate being singled down to a basic reputation. Don't let the same happen to us..."

Were.

Did.

As she finished her tirade, she went limp. Out of breath, she panted and gasped. She was still here, still hanging on, but only barely.

And Technoblade panicked.

"I'm sorry, that wasn't what I meant, I just... I..." A sob was ripped from his chest. "Puffy, I don't want you to die. I don't want you to leave."

He was given the chance to actually beg the gods for clemency. He was given a window to hope, for once. He could fight instead of sit back and find the bodies, forced to accept the outcome presented. He could *try*.

"You have forgiven me for things no one would or should. You have seen the worst of me and still decided I was worth your time and affection. You let me see myself through your eyes, and I finally believed I was far more than just what my actions made me out to be. You showed me that I was worth goodness, and sometimes I will never understand why. I'm scared that once you're not here anymore, all that will disappear."

She listened to him in complete silence until he was done, and swallowed hard. "Techno, you've always been worthy of love."

"You're the first one who truly made me believe it."

"Never doubt you are, please, never again. Michelle and Tristan would back me up."

As their names slipped out, her face twisted. For the first time, she seemed to be reconsidering her acceptance of her fate.

"Tell them I'm sorry," she murmured. "Tell them I'm sorry our time together was never enough, that I'm sorry I never got to properly say goodbye to Michelle and that I will never see Tristan fully grow up. Tell them I love them more than I could or will ever be able to show. Tristan is going to be a fine king, just like his father, and Michelle is going to do all the good in the world I never got the chance to. I love them so much, Techno, I love them, I would do anything to—"

He silenced her with a sudden cry of his own, just as agonized. He held her tighter and tighter, so close to squeezing the few drops of her last life out of her entirely.

"I'm not going to let Her take you," he vowed, eyes glaring into the darkness, darting to any moving shadow he could see. Tears welled up at the corners of his eyes. "I will *not* let Her take you."

Immortality was a curse, as Philza had often told him, but in that moment he thought only of Puffy and how he could save her life. It was selfish, but he was ready to have her cursed and alive rather than drifting off into Death's arms.

It was Puffy herself who somehow managed to talk him down with whispered nonsense his senses couldn't make head or tail of. It meant nothing, but it did do *something* to him. Eventually, his hold relaxed.

She stopped talking, but not because she didn't want to. She tried and tried, but no words came out. Her throat had finally given up, energy finally starting to drain her face and lungs completely. Her chest heaved. Her last words had been uttered, and no one but her had heard them.

She didn't give up. She accepted it. She knew when and where to stop, and Technoblade had always admired that.

The lull of eternal rest was seemingly too strong to struggle against any longer. She had fought so well all her lives, and against all odds had risen above it all. What goes up must come down eventually, and she had come down gracefully, honourably, with that same stark determination and fire so many loved and respected. She was remarkable and would remain so forevermore, in minds, bodies and souls.

When all was said and done, Techno would always remember her at the Red Banquet. It was a night so ripe with turmoil and pain, and yet it had still been the garden for hope, bravery, companionship and beauty. Despite the odds, she had smiled, and loved, and danced, and laughed. She was always a glimmer in the midst of so much horror and sorrow.

Even now, she sparkled like a diamond; tough and beautiful, until the end.

Death should be proud to finally take her.

"I love you."

It was something Technoblade had never outright said to Phil, Sam, or anyone else. He had dressed it up in so many different ways, and deep down he hoped they had understood. He was never as frank as he was then. He had never been given the grace of a proper goodbye with any of them to do so.

"I love you, Puffy. You were one of the best parts of my lives."

She smiled weakly up at him, her eyes barely alight with a dim sparkle. They couldn't see him anymore, and she couldn't hear his words. All she seemed to know was feeling, warmth and gentleness, and love. It was the last thing of value he could give her. The last thank you.

He rushed to place a tender kiss on her forehead.

As he pulled away, so did her last breath.

Puffy—queen and captain—was the first to die in the Blade's arms. She was the first he got to say goodbye to, and with it he bid farewell to all the others he didn't get to. He could feel their gazes on him as he stepped back out onto the field.

He chucked the Western Crown at the armies' feet. The West retreated in a panic. The South rejoiced.

He gently lay the Queen's body down. The South fell deathly quiet. Muffled gasps and sobs of shock were the only things that escaped from anyone.

The only words came from the royal children.

"Ma?"

When she received no reply or reaction, Michelle broke down. Between pleas slurred by tears, she rushed to her mother's limp side and took her hand, screwing her eyes shut in a desperate attempt to hide her view of her still abundantly bleeding wounds.

Tristan staggered out from the crowd, clutching a dislocated shoulder. He too faltered when he saw the body, his sister bent over her like a burial shroud. He didn't take a single step closer, not until Tina laid a shaking touch on his back.

The Prince had seen Death claim lives, and he had heard and seen how much grief had torn his family apart without truly understanding the pain. He had never really had a chance to properly feel it.

He shook off Tina's touches, then went to kneel beside his sister. At first he seemed to just be analyzing the body in front of him, taking in the battered armour, the blood, the sweat, and the softness of his mother's features that remained despite it all. He cupped her cheek, thumb brushing against the corner of her lips.

She still had the small smile, soft and genuine, relieved and sleepy. If she had been in any pain in her last moments, she didn't show it.

That was what truly seemed to break him.

Tristan screwed his eyes shut and headbutted his mother's forehead, refusing to pull away. He stayed glued to her, quiet tears desperately trying to wash away her brightened features.

Maybe if she had an expression twisted by agony, still fighting, maybe it would have been easier for him to bear. It would have been inevitable, a cruel twist of Fate no one could do anything against. Instead, they all saw the proof that she allowed herself to go.

Maybe had even been happy to do so.

Only Technoblade knew the truth, even as the fresh memory of her final moments muddled in his mind. Soon, he was certain they would disappear completely.

He would forget his fear, he would forget her words. He would forget the cave and the crashing waves at its entrance. He would forget it all, except for her smile.

It would be the only living proof that his deadly touch had brought someone relief.

The realization did not make the heartache any easier to bear.

The first thing she saw when she opened her eyes was the Angel of Death. She hadn't expected to. She would have asked questions if not for his warm smile and the familiarity of his figure that reduced her to silence.

"Welcome, Captain Puffy," he said, outstretching his arms in warm greeting. "Queen of kings."

She broke out into a wide smile. "Phil," she breathed and rushed into his embrace.

He was softer than she remembered him being, lighter to the touch. His feathers ruffled against her and tickled her back, gliding over her spine like currents of soft air. His hands were just the same: light and airy, as if he was not entirely there.

The gentle, welcoming hug soon turned rough and friendly as he squeezed her hard, laughing. Even that she could barely feel.

"It's so good to see you again," he sighed.

"Likewise! It feels like years!"

"It has been years!"

Puffy was about to make a quip or berate him for not visiting her sooner, when suddenly she realized. She drifted away from his arms.

"You're dead," she remembered, puzzled. She frowned. "I saw you get shot. We buried you."

"I am dead," Philza agreed somberly, his excitement at their reunion subduing into something darker.

Agony flashed in front of her eyes and deep into her body. Puffy gasped and doubled over, gripping at the spot in her stomach where the battle wound gaped; open, painful, and ugly. Cold and clammy armour clamped around the rest of her body, encasing her in a metal death trap. Smoke filled her lungs, and blood landed on her tongue. She tried to scream, but nothing came out, not even a murmur or a breath.

Shaking fingers drew away out of morbid curiosity and raised to her eye level, only for her to realize they were clean. As quickly as it had come, the agony faded away. Looking down at her abdomen, she saw no injury, nor did she notice any scars over the rest of her body. The final straw came when she touched the side of her face. The crooked scar that had once dug deep into her jaw was not so anymore.

All old wounds, as well as the new, were gone entirely. The decades of war and turmoil that had been branded onto her skin were erased in an instant, so easily and swiftly.

"It hurts at first, but just for a little while. Just until your mortal body loses its last grip on life."

A woman joined Philza's side, dressed head to toe in black. A wide brimmed hat and a purple veil covered her face, with only a smile and a pair of otherworldly shining eyes visible.

At once, Puffy bent down to one knee and bowed her head.

It was Lady Death's own finger who raised her from the floor, cold under her chin.

"You deserve to bow to no one, Captain."

Puffy blinked up at her. "Where am I?"

"Wherever you want to be." The goddess reached her hand out to her. "Do you trust me?"

Puffy couldn't think straight. She swallowed hard but felt no saliva. She barely felt her own throat.

"What if I don't?" she asked.

"Then I will let you return to the Plain, but a soul without a body is a hard existence to lead, and cannot so easily be taken back. To live an eternity apart from the living is difficult too, but rewarding in the end. They have lost you for now, but you will never lose them. They'll come to you eventually, in Time's due course."

Perhaps there was indeed a reason ghosts often wailed.

Puffy took Death's hand with no fear.

A shock ran up her body, stiffening her to her core before evaporating. All that remained was a quiet daze. It soothed all remaining phantom pains and closed the last of her scars. Calmness trickled into her veins and filled her up with a purifying feeling that made the tips of her ears and her fingers tingle.

She blinked once, and saw all three of her lives flash in front of her.

She blinked again, and she was in a cave.

She had been in it only once, and half unconscious, but she would still recognize it anywhere. The dark stone walls, the rocky floor, and the lingering stench of rotting seaweed. It smelled and looked like Death—no offense to the Lady herself.

"None taken," the goddess smiled, humbled.

The ocean waves swirled and crashed over the entrance, trapping them inside.

Puffy swallowed hard. Was this it? Was this where she was damned to spend eternity, in a dark, cramped tomb?

"Only if you choose to wallow in what keeps you stuck here."

Puffy shot Death a puzzled look. "What do you mean?"

"Some wounds are engraved deeper within us than we realize. I can only do so much. The rest of the healing is up to you."

"Do you have any regrets?" Philza translated. "Any remorse over anything at all?"

"Always," Puffy admitted, ears plastered against her scalp.

"Then you need to let them go."

Her tongue tied. "I... I can't."

Denying everything felt wrong. She had hurt people, she had made awful decisions, she had condemned innocent souls in more ways than one. Willingly casting it all aside would be downright evil of her.

Phil's gaze was sympathetic. "You have to try. No one is asking you to forget anything, simply make your peace. Your guilt is your last prison cell. Stitch up your last wounds, Puffy."

Almost in response to his words, old injuries resurfaced and clouded her senses. All she could feel was the gaping pain each of them carried with them.

Stitch them up.

She took each one, tore off the bloodstained bandage she had haphazardly slapped across them and cleaned them properly. From Tubbo's abandonment as a baby to killing Antfrost, no matter how big or how small, they all received the same treatment. It stung from time to time, but Puffy soon learned to power through regardless. It was a necessary suffering, and one that paid off.

She apologized, she cried, she muttered and she prayed. She mourned every ounce of remorse and laid it to rest. The gnashes dwindled in number.

Her head became clearer, and her conscience lighter as guilty load after guilty load was removed.

She must have been doing something right; the raging water outside the cave entrance gradually settled and pulled away, eventually leaving a thick enough stretch of soaked sand for her to leave if she so desired.

With the paragons of the afterlife's gentle coaxing, she did, just as the last drop of remorse fell off her mind. It was like cutting a taught leash—once it was severed, she rocketed forward, freedom pushing at her back like the wind pushed against a galleon's sails.

Before her stretched a coastline that seemed to be all those she had known, all at once. The high cliffs mirrored those of the Badlands; the sand was the South's; and the clear beauty of the water was as perfect as the rolling waves crashing against the piers of her childhood town.

All she saw were miles of cliffs, miles of beach, miles of ocean and miles of white sky stretching out in every direction. Salty wind brushed her lips and tongue, gently embracing her into the afterlife.

Her afterlife.

It felt like a reward, catered to her and her alone.

She was pretty sure it was, as Phil's questioning gaze waited patiently for her reaction.

"It's the ocean," she told him.

"I wouldn't have expected anything different from you."

They began to walk, the sea captain caught between the matching strides of Death and her Angel.

She turned back to Philza, some of his previous words finally sinking in.

"You called me a queen of kings," she said, "why?"

"You have loved, befriended, married, and mothered kings and leaders of every kind," he replied with a smile. "You have played crucial parts in rules, great and small, and so many nations were made better places thanks to you, no matter what some insist on believing."

He gestured upwards with a jerk of his head. She craned her neck.

Puffy glimpsed a fiery amber stare, glaring at her from the top of the cliff. As soon as it was noticed, it disappeared. The last thing she saw of Corpse was the flick of a dark black tail disappearing from view.

When it did, Philza smiled. "He shouldn't bother you anymore."

That was a relief, but the least of her priorities. She forgot all about the stalking shadow as soon as she saw the two whirlwinds bolting towards her.

"Captain!"

Tommy got there first, skidding to a halt on the wet sand right in the middle of her path. Seeing him smiling, shining, glowing with happiness almost brought Puffy to tears.

Still, Tommy was still Tommy. He gave her a flourished salute and bowed. "How do? Fancy seeing you here!"

Amused, she returned his greeting with just as much extravagance. She thought that would be that but Tommy, as always, surprised her. He hugged her tightly.

"We really did miss you," he murmured against her curls.

"I missed you too, more than I can say, Tommy. There hasn't been a day where I haven't thought of you."

She squeezed him tighter. Even after so long, her body still remembered the shape of his own, and how to hug him just right.

"Any room for me?"

Peering over Tommy's shoulder, she caught sight of two curled horns and a floppy fringe. When Tommy let go of her, she didn't immediately go to them. She hesitated and simply took the time to take him all in.

Tubbo smiled at her and outstretched his arms. "Hey, Mum. Don't leave me hanging."

She wouldn't dare, not like she had done countless times before.

The hug she gave her son was an apology as much as it was a declaration of motherly love. With no remorse to painfully hang on to, it all seemed so much easier.

Both her boys looked ageless, as was everyone else she had encountered. No age, no marks of death or mortal turmoil—only peace and carefree eternity.

Puffy pulled away and brushed Tubbo's hair out of his eyes. "Are you alright?" she whispered, just low enough so only he could hear.

He nodded. "Yeah, I am now."

"What happened? Ranboo didn't mention much in his letter, he just broke the news—or maybe he did and I just didn't read that far down, or—"

"I'll tell you," he promised. "We have all the time in the world now." He took her hand. "But there's something more important you need to see first."

He took the lead, and Death let him. He guided them all down, down, down the coastline, waves licking at the soles of their feet and hooves. Tommy walked close to Phil, who took to gently tickling him with the tips of his wings. The ocean breeze pushed Death's veil over her face, revealing her deathly palour to the light. For such a feared diety, her features were soft and rounded, bouncing with joy and laughter. Every time she caught Puffy's eyes, only the goodness and the light in her shone through. The darkenss was only present in the clothes she wore.

How could anyone fear Death after meeting her face to face?

Tubbo kept his eyes focused far into the distance, and seemed to be quickening his pace every few minutes. Puffy kept up easily, with boundless energy that could never deplete. She was ready to run off right into the sunset, jump over the horizon and climb the clouds up to the white skies above.

At last, they came to what looked like the end of the beach, or more likely a simple obstacle—how could a boundless coastline ever have an end?

A silver dog cocked her ears as Puffy approached, then raised her head from between her paws and began to bark up at the rocks behind her.

On a pile of jagged boulders, with his back to the millions of suns that lit up the sky, stood a tall silhouette. Hints of green and gold sparkled against her eyes, and she stopped in her tracks.

When she glanced around, everyone had left her side. Tubbo's hand had slipped from hers without her even knowing. She was alone, and even Lady Death's gaze was nowhere to be found. All she could see was the figure, the familiar shadow whose colours seemed to flow back the longer she stared.

He turned his head away from the ocean. The adoring look in his green eyes ripped a breathless sob from her chest.

"Sam?"

His smile was nervous. "Hey," he called, soft thunder rumbling in his voice.

Puffy returned his grin in disbelief, "Hi."

He slowly stepped down from his outcrop, almost losing his footing on the last slippery rock. It almost made her laugh, except she had no air to do so. Everything felt like it had been punched clean out of her, left trodden down in her hoofprints on the sand, and washed away by the tide.

Puffy could only watch, frozen in place, as he took a few steps towards her. When he saw that she didn't move, Sam stopped too.

"I promised myself I'd have something ready to say when this day came," he whispered, voice melting into the gentle lap of the waves. He seemed unsure now, worried perhaps that she was angry, that she didn't want to see him. "I... I'm coming up empty... I guess all I can say is I'm sorry. For everything. I'm sorry."

"Our first meeting in years," Puffy said, "and the first thing you do is apologize."

"I don't know what else to say."

"Then don't say anything." She ran into his arms. "Don't say anything at all."

Two long-lost hearts collided, reunited at last.

They collapsed to their knees onto the sand, latched around each other like chains, clinging on for dear Death. Puffy's nails dug deep into his back and her head pressed into his shoulder, desperate to feel him—all of him—after so long.

She was never going to let go again.

Never again.

Puffy had mourned Sam longer than she had known him, and loved him all throughout. She would love him until the end of Time.

Always and forever.

Come what may.

Chapter Forty-Three: Where The Legends Rest

Tristan had never sung in public before.

The first time he did was at his mother's funeral.

There in the royal mausoleum, once the rudimentary and plain stone encasing had sealed Puffy's raised resting place shut and most of the gathering had drifted away and out the gates, he stood between his parents' tombs with his guitar. The few onlookers who were close enough to notice stopped and turned back, curious enough to linger at the heart of the kingdom's sorrow just a little longer.

He sang and played a ballad full of heartache and grief. Technoblade hadn't heard it before. The Prince's music was always so upbeat and vibrant, growing tangled and blooming gardens wherever he played. Even the sadder songs held remnants of joy and hope in them. This one did not. Its beauty was in its sadness, its dark skies and the tears that poured and plucked the strings when Tristan's fingers shook too much to do so properly themselves. Perhaps it was an original composition for the occasion.

Techno didn't ask. He wouldn't have dreamed to.

When he finished, the boy stayed there for a while. He laid his hand on his father's tomb and placed a kiss on his mother's. He seemed to be muttering something no one could quite catch. He pulled away and left soon after, furiously wiping his eyes.

From that moment on, and for quite a while, there was silence.

The songbird fell quiet for a few months. All his music had been sucked out of him, left to wander the hallways aimlessly, ghostly notes without a player.

On the contrary, his sister became louder than she had ever been. She sparred and trained and obsessively checked around the barracks from dawn until dusk, at a rhythm that was too much even for Technoblade to keep up with.

He tried to talk to them both, to no avail. Deflection and escape were two coping mechanisms they shared between them, perhaps reassuring for themselves but infuriating and concerning for those who tried to help.

Technoblade had learned that perhaps constant worry was not the way to go. He did the only thing he could do—live. He continued living despite it all, occupying himself, sparring, laughing when he could and trying to smile a little every day.

It was hard. There were many dark days ahead, but he strived to make them more bearable for everyone he loved.

It paid off, eventually.

It took a while for their own smiles to break again. Michelle broke first, scoffing indirectly at a joke Seapeekay made. When the fox, her uncle and even she realized, she was taken aback. She stood in silence, guilt and shock warring plainly on her face. She must have been thinking that perhaps a drop of happiness was an insult to her mother's passing, before eventually realizing that it in fact could be considered an honourable thing. Puffy had strived so hard to make the South a peaceful and joyous place amidst her own grief, and Michelle remembered it full well. Her light returned.

Tristan's own sorrow was harder to shake. With his mother's death, another new burden had crept up onto him, ensnaring his brow with a crown of thorns and a regal cape of dread and apprehension. It was too much for a mere sixteen-year-old to bear. Technoblade held the cabinet off for as long as was necessary, at least until the Crown Prince brightened even just a little. It took a while for him to smile again. It took even longer to get him to find the courage to retrieve his guitar, still where he left it in the royal mausoleum. It was when four months had finally and fully passed since the funeral that Tristan began to play again.

His first melody was a love song, one Technoblade wouldn't have discarded as one the late King and Queen had danced to and softly sang together.

The palace sighed in relief, and sunlight poured back into everyone's lives.

Techno acted as a loose regent until the Prince deemed himself ready to finally become King.

He made that decision on the eve of his twentieth birthday. A week later, the kingdom and its people were firmly put in the hands and care of King Tristan of the Southern Lands.

Technoblade felt a burden lift, but his shoulders still sagged with weight. At the coronation feast, Michelle noticed. She made a comment that he quickly brushed off, downing an oncoming cough with a large glass of wine. It took an obviously painful migraine and another two remarks for the piglin to finally take them into account, and a gentle but firm order from the King himself to get him to go and rest.

It proved to be the beginning of an end he hadn't seen coming.

The next morning he didn't feel like getting up. That was unusual. He always did, no matter what. He never slept the day away, no matter what the court's joking rumours claimed. The week after that, he was fine. Maybe he had just been lacking rest amidst the revelry, and he made sure to stick to a strict sleep schedule from that point on.

Then the tiredness came again, stronger this time. Resting did nothing to banish it this time around. If anything, the soft mattress and furs only made it worse.

With the exhaustion of practically everything overtaking his body, he began to feel the true strain of his muscles, his aching joints, and the mess in his chest. His heart and his lungs seemed to weigh like tons of bricks, slowly becoming too heavy for him to lug around for much longer. He coughed more often, sickly splutters turning to dry and shallow ones, cavernous and empty of anything but dread.

The pull started a week or so after that.

It was light at first, just a simple tug or two that sent him stumbling over his feet and into furniture. Those who saw it happen rushed to the piglin's aid, even though he always waved them off. He was fine, despite what people thought. He was fine.

But the pull was something else.

The small string became a rope, and before long that rope became a chain clamped around his neck. It yanked him around with no mercy, mangling him left and right like a rabid dog.

It took him a while to realize where it was trying to take him. The leash tried to drag him well over the South's borders, far past the Four Realms entirely. It wanted to pull him away from the luxurious life he had settled into, shoving him back into the cold and dangerous world of wilderness. It wanted to replace the family he had here with solitude, once again wanting loneliness and guilt to gnaw at his bones.

He resisted as long as he could. However, Technoblade knew deep down where it was truly pulling him to. He hadn't felt a call like it in forever.

Time was running short, and he didn't have a choice.

His last few days in the South were spent just as they always were. There was no artifice, no final celebrations to send him off. How could there be, when he told no one. Although the court could not see a difference, Techno could. Every gaze and glance he gave, every inhale, every flick of his ears;

every one took in far more than they ever had before. Beyond his fading eyesight and stuffy hearing, the world was crisper than it had ever been.

He noticed some of the smaller things, like the way Seapeekay smiled with all his teeth or how Tina colour coordinated her cuttings. The way Boomer croaked as he hummed that familiar little tune, one that the piglin still didn't know the name of after all these years. He even began to notice things about his niece and nephew he didn't before, things that only made him love them more. Things he realized too late to appreciate properly.

He hadn't known just how many days he had left before he had to leave, so he treated each day as his last. Every bid of goodnight hid a goodbye, just in case.

It didn't take long for the moment itself to come along.

Despite sleeping much more than he ever had, Technoblade stayed awake one night. He didn't know why, not until he felt the tug and the call once again.

Just before dawn, he packed a small bag, got dressed, and after one last fond look at his room, he left.

He was planning to do so discreetly, under the cover of the fading shadows, before the palace woke up and his disappearance was noticed.

Unfortunately, he never made it past the corridor outside his chambers.

"Uncle? What are you doing?"

Turning around, Technoblade was surprised to find Tristan staring him down by his own chambers, about to walk in just as the piglin had closed his own door.

The young man pulled away, his hand on the knob drifting back down to his side, instead scrutinizing his uncle with such curiosity, it was almost as if he was trying to pick him apart completely. Even so, his gaze glistened with sparks of bright sun and mellow joy.

Looking at him then, Technoblade couldn't see a single sign of a shadow, past, present or even future in, on or around him.

Maybe, despite everything, his nephew wasn't destined for a tragedy after all. Maybe he had only been fearing the worst. Maybe he was simply destined to be well and truly happy. It would be a welcome change from all the fates Technoblade had been used to in his lives.

"It's well past four," Tristan continued. "You don't usually stay up this late anymore."

"I could ask you the same thing." He looked his nephew up and down. It didn't appear he had just gotten out of bed. On the contrary, in fact. "You've been busy."

"You noticed?"

"Alone?"

"Not exactly."

Ah, so that was what the perfume hanging in the air was for.

Technoblade chuckled. "Found your knight in shining armour yet?"

Tristan shrugged. "I don't know yet. We're taking it slow. Only time will tell."

The small, bashful grin that came with his reply told Techno that yes, maybe he had. He hoped it would be the case, that he wouldn't have to look as far for happiness as others were forced to. The piglin would have personally made sure it wouldn't be the case, had the invisible chain around his throat not tugged at him again, drawing out a pained cough and reminding him of his journey ahead.

"What's the pack for?" Tristan finally asked him.

He knew he wouldn't have been able to hide it all for long. "Go get your sister," he ordered.

Tristan very obviously had questions, but he didn't ask them outright. He did as he was told, and a few minutes later Michelle trotted up to join them.

"Techno, what's going on?"

Her inquiry fell on old, tattered and deaf ears, and received nothing but a tired blink of his eyes. He turned and wordlessly invited them to follow him. Just as silently, they obeyed.

He led them down the twisting, familiar halls of the Southern palace, taking in their stinking magnificence and opulent excess one last time. He had never cared too much for it, marveling more at the people he cared for that roamed in its glittering shadows. He didn't want to start to care for it now, not at the end. His brain didn't give him too much of a choice.

The call reminded him of what awaited him far away from the South; a beauty unlike any other, shimmering white slopes and perfect lakes of icy blue crystal. It made the separation from the palace just a little bit sweeter.

It still would not replace those inside it. Two of those who remained the closest to his heart were still following him blindly, confused but still holding their tongues.

They stepped outside, and Technoblade led them down towards the lake. They were just about to veer off into the forest when Michelle put her foot down.

She pulled him back by the hem of his cloak. "What are you doing?"

As much as he wanted to play it off just to keep moving, he couldn't find it in his heart to do so. He hunched his shoulders and looked askance. He couldn't even face them.

"I'll explain," he promised, "but not right now. Please, just walk with me."

The inquiries burned in their throats. He could feel them flake against his back, searing embers reaching into him by force. He expected more to come. He thought they would interrogate him until he relented.

He didn't expect them to fall back into caring docility. Michelle's hand found its way to the furry mane around his neck, softly tangling her fingers deep into the roots. Tristan's hand joined hers on the opposite side, with the very same touch.

They weren't trying to pull him back, nor were they buttering their way into caving in his will to reply. They were waiting for him to make the first move, to guide them down his path. He would, for a little while.

He walked. They stayed right beside him the whole time, warm fingers brushing wrinkled skin that only wanted to feel more of it. It wanted to be held, stroked, loved and wrapped in warmth. It also wanted to feel the bitter cold again, the tundra ice and sharp wind tearing his body to shreds.

It kept him going, walking on and on through the forest. Once a dark playground for young lovers, it became a black tunnel made perfect for a funeral march. The soft moss-trodden paths pulled him down. The earth was eager to reclaim what it was owed.

Wait a little longer, please.

Just until he got where he wanted to be. Needed to be.

Nighttime still shrouded the landscape, but somehow he could tell they were reaching the edge of the pine forest. Beyond that border, the wilderness beckoned, marshland and jagged mountain peaks paving the way.

He stopped.

Michelle and Tristan stopped beside him.

As if he was jolted from a dream, Tristan blinked up at him. "What is it?"

"This is where I walk alone."

"You're leaving."

The first non-question he had heard recently. There was no need to ask. Michelle knew. Tristan knew. Technoblade knew.

He turned to look at them. To his eyes, they somehow looked even more like children than they once were. They were still so young and wide-eyed, still newer to the world than many.

They always would look smaller and frailer than they were, especially to their uncle. The uncle who watched them grow and thrive, who smiled when they laughed and consoled them when they cried. The uncle who never wanted to leave them, even with Fate yanking him back into his past.

He stretched out his arms. The young king and the general rushed in, so close to knocking him over entirely. He wished they would. The paths could swallow him whole and let him rest beneath the trees, buried with nothing but overwhelming affection.

Curse his reflexes—still as sharp as they had always been—that had him brace against the impact, hold himself together, and hug both of them back tighter than he ever had before.

The silence spoke volumes, but it couldn't make them cry. Not until Tristan's voice broke through with a whimper.

"I don't want you to go..."

"I know." What else could he say? He pressed his snout to the top of his head, kissing his golden curls. He briefly closed his eyes. When he opened them again his eyelashes were wet. "I know..."

They didn't ask why, they didn't ask how. They knew, and they wanted to stop it. Even if they all knew it was impossible.

"You silly, senile old man," Michelle grunted sternly. "I should lock you in the dungeons."

"I'd like to see you try," he snorted back.

"I would, gladly."

"I know."

She wouldn't. She loved him too much. He loved her too much to force her to do so, just as she loved him too much to keep him trapped anywhere, no matter how unhappy it made her.

Technoblade couldn't stomach the last view of his beloved family being tears and frowns. He had to make them smile, at any cost.

"Your parents should be proud of who you've become," he said, pulling away slightly. He thumbed each of their cheeks with one hand, smearing faint grins back onto their faces. "I know I am. If I ever did have a son or daughter of my own, I would have wanted them to turn out like you."

They were only children that perhaps he hadn't completely failed. That was something, at least. He only hoped he'd earn forgiveness for the others, one day. Even if it would take eternity, he wanted to put old mistakes right. There were a lot of them to mull over. His journey would perhaps be long enough to do so.

A copper haze began to dust the edges of the mountain chain, defining the staggering silhouettes of the treacherous peaks. The time was closing in.

"Here." He took off the emerald pendant hanging around his neck, placing it into Michelle's open hands and placing Tristan's on top. "What's mine is yours, forever."

As his last precious material possession slipped from his care, the chain tugged harder. Fate's whip cracked upon his back. The call was louder, more insistent now. He felt more compelled to follow it.

Tristan shook his head slowly. "I can't imagine a life without you," he whispered in disbelief.

"You don't have to; you're going to live it whether you like it or not."

"Is that supposed to reassure us?"

"No," Technoblade sighed. "No, it's not. I'm just telling you the truth about what's to come. I can never lie to you, any of you. It's going to be hard, but I'm not worried. You have your father's brains—"

He couldn't help but glance at Michelle.

"—and your mother's courage."

His eyes landed back on Tristan. The young king inhaled deeply, trying to regain a more regal posture. He was still new to it, Technoblade noticed with an amused snort. It was well known a crown was so much heavier than a simple coronet.

He was still holding his place well, and with so many caring souls around him, he would do more than fine.

Technoblade was an anarchist at heart, but only for the deserving. He loved, raised and stood by good-hearted rulers who did their best—they weren't tyrants.

Sam and Puffy hadn't been, and neither would their son.

Indirectly or not, he had contributed to a safe, stable and fair dynasty of monarchs that sat and would sit on the Southern throne for years to come.

It was an honest final task of great and peaceful importance. Protesilaus too could finally relax and drift off into the slumber of secret histories.

"If there's one thing I *will* carry with me from you two, it's the amount of scars you've given me over the years."

They laughed and he smiled. They were probably reminiscing about younger years with wooden swords and no cares or concept of pain. Technoblade was referring to something slightly different. Scars indeed, but ones that hurt well, with a reason and a purpose. The scars of emotional outbursts, sharp remarks and errors—a lot of errors. They'd stay with him forever, but it was more than worth it. Every scar had a joyous moment to match, and in that balance of tattered years he had loved them through those perfect blemishes.

A perfectly imperfect world was what he had loved. It was the one he'd leave behind, but at least he had been there for a while. He had been lucky enough to know true hope and happiness, even for a short time.

Yeah, it was enough.

"Once I reach the tundra again," he promised them both. "I'll go see Phil, and then I'll rest."

He made sure they knew it was genuine—to Tristan above all. He could never lie to him, in good faith or not. He still couldn't tell him the whole truth either. He could sugarcoat it, though.

He'd rest. Whatever that entailed.

His ancient bones creaked fondly at the thought.

The last time he glanced their way, just as the sun chased the moon away behind the mountains, gold and silver lights entwining around them, he saw gods.

Apollo and Artemis.

Tristan and Michelle.

How he would miss them.

It took him a while to find his way back to the SMP. He was almost sure he wouldn't make it in time. He refused to take a boat, instead opting for a long and lonely journey on foot, by land. He took no note of the passing time or seasons, not until the harsh winter he traversed proved to be endless. He was getting close.

How long had he walked; a week, a month, a year? Who was to say?

The tombstone at the top of the mountain certainly didn't seem to care. Neither did Technoblade's own stone effigy, a little worse for wear but still standing proudly where he had left it all those years ago.

"Hello, old friend." The flicker of a smile warmed his snout as he placed a hand on the grave. "You called?"

He didn't stop for a simple visit anymore. He wasn't going to run off into solitude or carve out another life far away.

He was here to stay.

He painstakingly dug a second grave beside the first, hacking into the stone with every ounce of strength that remained within him. When the hole was complete, he laid his sword and battle crown to the side, then clambered in and lay down, curled up on his cloak.

The tundra and its elements took care of the rest, and when Philza hugged him again and finally welcomed him to eternity, he felt nothing but relief.

Epilogue: Stars Above

A young man in his early twenties, still sporting the soft traces of boyhood, was brought before King Eret one day.

He had golden brown curls and a pair of ram's horns, as well as a laid back smile that made everyone feel strangely at ease. A honey wood guitar was strapped to his back, and yet he held himself with an air of nobility that the usual crowd of travelling bards did not have. No one knew his name nor where he and his ship had come from, but there was a familiarity in him that starstruck the entire court nevertheless.

In that audience with the king, he made no threats of war, no monetary negotiations, and no pleas for over the top favours.

Instead, he told a story.

He clearly wasn't the most expert of storytellers, but he recounted every detail of his tale with a natural, musical ease that enchanted everyone in earshot.

Ranboo above all.

He scrutinized the stranger with great intent, taking in everything about him. He made sure everything lined up as he told his tale. He watched him carefully when Ranboo and Eret gave him an extensive tour of the lands of the SMP. He made sure he was a hundred percent correct in his assumptions before speaking up.

When Eret left their side and the newcomer prepared to return to his ship for the evening, Ranboo decided to shoot his shot.

"Prince Tristan."

The young man stopped in his tracks, startled. He turned around.

Ranboo's suspicions were confirmed.

"You never gave us your name," he said as a way or explanation. "It was a lucky guess."

"*King* Tristan, actually." He seemed pleasantly surprised at the recognition. His grin widened in return. "And you must be Ranboo. You didn't give me your own name either."

"I thought my reputation preceded me."

"Call me foolish, but I couldn't help but doubt my own memory."

The hybrid chuckled. "Believe me, I know what that's like."

They shook hands, and Ranboo's prim and proper figure relaxed. It was good to speak to a stranger with a name rather than just a vague amalgamation of passing resemblances.

It was also hard.

The next walk they took, just the two of them, was done in a surprising silence. They glanced at each other occasionally, smiles pouring out like rays of sunshine.

Ranboo felt like he was getting younger and brisker with every step he took, that the world grew brighter and brighter. Something about the young King rejuvenated him, something he sorely missed. He couldn't remember the last time he met someone far younger than himself, let alone felt their energy embrace him like an aura.

It spread to everyone else too as Tristan went from admiring the sights of the SMP to meeting its people.

Niki was the first one to put together the pieces, although it admittedly took her a while. It was the smile that finally had her clapping her hands to her mouth in recognition as Tristan carried with him the warmth of a lover long since passed on. She hugged and talked with him like she'd never let him go again, desperate to keep something of Puffy in her life a little longer.

Then came the Badlands, a meeting that Ranboo had originally been wary of. However, any and all contempt towards the parents' departure seemed to disappear as soon as they laid eyes on their son, love and friendship conquering all in the end. Any burden or spark of anger was not held over Tristan's head. They too kept him close, reluctant to lose the fragments of phantoms they adored despite it all.

Michael welcomed him warmly, and obviously asked about Michelle. She was alright, he was told, looking after their kingdom while Tristan was away. She was shining brighter and bolder with every passing day. It didn't seem to surprise the piglin in the slightest. As far as Ranboo knew they still kept a frequent correspondence. He offered that Tristan stay with him for a while, and send for his sister one day. The King happily told him that she would like that a lot.

All those Tristan talked to seemed to want to keep him here in one way or another. The SMP wanted to claim another unsuspecting warrior. Ranboo vowed to not let that happen, not again. Regardless of who Tristan was, who he loved and admired and even who he was born to, he didn't belong in the SMP.

And that was alright.

The final encounter was by far the saddest. By request, Ranboo took Tristan to see the tombs in L'Manberg. He knelt beside the headstones and traced Tommy and Tubbo's names.

"Hey," he whispered, "It's me—your little brother. I know it's a little late, but it's nice to finally meet you."

Ranboo couldn't help it. He let out a tearful gasp and bit his wrist before he crumbled completely. When Tristan ran up to see if he was alright, he turned him away with a violent shake of his head. It still hurt so badly, even after all this time.

"I shouldn't have asked to come, I'm sorry," Tristan apologized.

"No, no," the hybrid rushed to reassure, quickly trying to compose himself. "It's your right. It's just me, I'm sorry. There's just... just..."

Just a lot I never got to do or say.

He screwed his eyes shut as the guilt twisted his guts, and kept them so until a hand came to cup his cheek.

"Can you show me some of the flower fields around here?" Tristan smiled softly. "Uncle Techno always told us how much you love them."

It was no how Ranboo had expected to spend his late afternoon, but he wouldn't have it any other way. Youthful again, he let his mind wander from his responsibilities—sometimes, his frequent memory loss still came in handy—and to nothing but the bliss of peace. The sky stretched on forever, falling into the horizon. The wildflowers chased its tumble too, running and

sprouting off into the sunset. Their petals were soft beneath his fingers, and their stems easy to weave. Ranboo had always had a knack for making flower chains, even if he didn't have much time to do so anymore. He was a bit out of practice and was no stranger to slip-ups, but he was doing fine.

"I can't offer you fancy dinners or lavish presents worthy of visiting royalty," he said, "but I can give you this."

He laid the flower crown on top of Tristan's head. The young man laughed, then rearranged it over his horns until it held just right.

"You've given me so much already, as well as my family as a whole," Tristan replied. "I can't thank you enough for any of it."

Ranboo was feeling a little cheeky. "Well..." He glanced at the guitar. "Maybe you could thank me with a song or two."

He didn't need to ask twice. Tristan happily grabbed his instrument and threw himself wholeheartedly into a repertoire of soft ballads, the perfect lullabies for the setting sun. Ranboo simply listened and stared in awe. Even as the daylight disappeared, the King was bright and golden. He was his own sun, a musical star sent to earth and delighting in it.

The flower crown suited him all too well, too. Ranboo could far more easily accept it resting on his brow than he could one of heavy gold and jewels. The hybrid briefly wondered if anyone had even made him a flower crown before: his sister, perhaps, or his parents.

Maybe his uncle.

Probably his uncle, if Ranboo remembered the piglin correctly—he still doubted he could, sometimes. There hadn't been a mention of him since Tristan turned up; not a name, not even a hint. Nothing but the familiar emerald pendant hanging around Tristan's neck. It hadn't escaped Ranboo's notice.

"How is Techno?"

"I wouldn't know," Tristan replied, shoulder sagging only slightly. "He left us years ago now. He said he was going back to the tundra."

"I haven't seen him," Ranboo answered honestly. He still visited the Antarctic Commune on occasion, out of nostalgia more than anything.

"I know you haven't. You can't have. He's dead."

"Dead?"

The word shot out and plummeted back into Ranboo's mouth, landing deep inside him.

The young man didn't look at him. "Yeah, dead. He wanted to be put to rest on the mountain, close to Philza."

"There's no marker."

"Oh, trust me," Tristan replied, biting out a forced laugh. "He's there. If there's one thing he's always been, it's honest with me. He wouldn't lie about something like this."

Ranboo doubted it still.

The day Tristan finally left the SMP, bound once more for his faraway kingdom, Ranboo travelled to the tundra again and climbed up the mountain. At first glance, there was no marker, apart from Phil's headstone and guardian statue, as always. But looking closer, Ranboo could just about see that a large plot of icy ground beside the avian's resting place was raised a little. As he shovelled away more of the snow around it, he found a discarded greatsword and crown.

Tristan was right, in a good but painful way.

Ranboo shed no tears, but he bowed to the hidden grave.

"Thank you, *sensei*."

The title Technoblade had always tried to get the hybrid to call him finally found its way out. Ranboo could practically hear Techno victoriously punch the air, wherever he was now.

Technoblade never died, and that still held up. His memory, his legend and all the good still existed, and would for the rest of Time. The love for him would persevere, forevermore.

He sat by both graves for a long time, and only headed off when the nighttime winds picked up again. As embarrassed as he was to admit it, Ranboo was no longer acclimated to the tundra, at least not as well as he used to be.

He returned to the Greater SMP, and bumped into Eret in the castle library.

"You've been out a while," the monarch remarked.

"Yeah, there's been a lot of things going on recently."

Eret fondly placed a hand on his shoulder. "The rose I laid at Pandora's Vault was from both of us."

He was always too good and empathetic, too kind and generous. A rose would mean nothing to most, but meant everything to Ranboo.

He was only reminded again and again how lucky he was to have him. A friend, a mentor, dare he even say family now. Eret would probably love that.

He filled the shoes left for him by so many other loved ones from lifetimes ago. He didn't replace them. He didn't erase their love or teachings. He added and built upon them. He didn't change Ranboo for the better. He helped build up what he already was.

Ranboo couldn't imagine his future without him, until it inevitably happened anyway.

A few years later, King Eret passed.

It was a peaceful and quiet departure in his sleep. It was a long time coming, and even Eret himself seemed to have known that. He took Fate and Death's commands in his stride, with unparalleled dignity and not a single protest or struggle. He had wrapped up all his affairs neatly, spent his last days doing what he loved most, then drifted away into immortality.

A month or two after that, Ranboo was crowned King of the Greater SMP.

Eret had no blood heirs, no matter how far, distantly and desperately Ranboo looked. He was the loneliest monarch he had ever met, although he had certainly hidden it well. The only giveaway of his isolation was in his last will and testament, in which he handed over his throne to his closest advisor.

"My closest and dearest friend," his last inked words read.

His one and only heir of everything.

The guilt closed in soon after. Ranboo wished that he had been better in every way.

The night of the coronation, while the nations celebrated the happy occasion in the great hall, feasting and drinking the evening away, Ranboo slipped away from the festivities. He made his way up to the tallest tower. One of

Eret's greatest joys had been to take them both up here and map out the night sky. Astronomy, like many other pastimes, had become their thing.

Tonight, however, the telescope sat alone, unused. Ranboo didn't need it; the stars were already out and glowing bright. There was one he had never noticed before, shinier than all the others.

He wondered if it was his dear friend, still as striking and fabulous, now roaming another realm and looking beautiful while he did.

As he looked up at the stars, he couldn't help but think of them, think of them all. All the friends and family he had lost throughout the years. He spared a thought and a prayer for each of them, just as he always did, although he knew that he couldn't be sad.

"And they all lived happily ever after" would be how a classic, fantastic tale would end, but that couldn't be further from the truth. They didn't live happily, forever, without cares or hardships.

But they lived, they loved, they smiled, they cried and when the time came, they died.

They lived a life, or rather three, and some even more than that. As long as they were still remembered, as long as what they had stood for still existed, as long as the right stories were told.

And to King Ranboo, *that* was what truly mattered.

Despite his predicament, Dream had thought his afterlife would be a particularly peaceful one, away from everyone and anything that could seriously hurt him.

How wrong that turned out to be.

"Sup, green bitch."

What he wouldn't give to pummel that nuisance's face into the wall again.

"Well that doesn't bode well for you now does it? If you're still thinking of stuff like that then you really are fucked."

"You can read minds too, now?" Dream muttered just loud enough so the boy could hear him. "Great. Fucking fantastic."

"No, your expression says it all. Although it would actually be pretty poggers if I could." With no hesitation, Tommy rushed back to the curtain of lava and right through it. The whine came a moment later. "Phil, can I get mind reading powers?"

"Absolutely not, mate."

"But Phil—"

"I wouldn't even give them to you if I could."

"You're no fun..."

Tommy stormed back into the cell with a moody huff and a whispered "bitch" under his breath.

Dream narrowed his eyes. "Dad sent you, did he?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I'm becoming the Angel of Death's apprentice."

A tut and disbelieving scoff from behind the lava curtain told Dream that in fact, no he wasn't. It only begged more questions.

"Then why are you here?"

"To tell you what an asshole you are."

Him and everyone else who had ever laid eyes on him or the results of his deeds. However, there was an uncharacteristic tone in Tommy's voice—a serious edge he wasn't accustomed to hearing. It promised to bring something different to this interaction, something that had never taken place before when they talked or fought.

He awaited the landslide, ready to tune it out as nothing but background noise. He had heard it all countless times. The effect they could have on him had long since worn off.

"You'll never be forgiven for all you did," Tommy began to absolutely no one's surprise. "You tore apart whole dynasties, generations of families who still have to live with the grief you brought. The SMP will always be ripe with holes and remnants of your fucking pathetic tantrums and the history books ruined by your name. You can apologize, you can cry, you can beg. You won't be forgiven completely, by any of them. Never."

Dream had expected as much and—well, he wasn't *fine* with it as such. He *understood* the consequences of his actions, let's put it that way.

He thought he did, until Tommy dropped the single sentence that changed everything.

"But you deserve to forgive yourself."

Dream almost laughed. He thought he had misheard. Tommy's blue gaze had never been more serious.

"No one gives a shit what happens to you now, but you should give a shit about what happens to yourself. I'd call you selfish, but I'd probably do the same. In fact, I did. We all did."

He gestured around him proudly, showing off some sort of paradise visible only to him. Dream scoffed at his stupidity, ignoring the small voice deep inside of him that wanted desperately to be able to see it too.

"You can let go of your guilt and live your death well. She doesn't care if you're a hero or a villain, she treats us all the same. This prison is your own making." He lowered his arms. "You can either stay here forever, or you can let go and leave. It's your choice."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because as much as I hate your guts, Phil said you did him a solid a while back. Something to do with getting to see Techno again, or I don't know. This is his thank you."

A little fucking late, Angel.

"No one deserves to spend eternity in a hellhole like yours."

Dream snorted. "You don't know what it looks like."

"It's pretty fucking obvious. I've only seen that look in your eyes in one other place."

The disbelieving and sarcastic grin fell immediately. Tommy left soon after. Dream wanted him to come back.

The cell, or what seemed to be his own soul's perception of it, was still so empty, still so cramped around him. The obsidian walls leered and the lava laughed and bubbled with vicious mockery.

This time Dream felt the sting of it all. His numbness broke just long enough for it to hurt.

He thought about Tommy's words for a long while. He made it sound so easy.

Forgive himself, and he could walk through the lava curtain at last.

Forgive himself, and he'd be free.

He could step out into the rolling fields Philza had once described to him, the beautiful and bountiful landscape of his mortal dreams. A horizon ticked by corn and golden wheat, an olive tree sheltering him with the most delicious shade. He would be able to sit still for ages and not feel like a prisoner. He could enjoy a break.

Then, over the hills and the crops would appear two familiar figures. One would shine with a thousand burning flames, a Catherine wheel of sparks and hooted laughter of wild glee; the other would complain lightly, struggle to keep up, and would then have eyes for no one but Dream.

And Dream would run with them.

He would run and tumble and shriek and laugh for the rest of Time, rushing across the afterlife carelessly.

Happily.

If he looked back, he'd see his friends. If he looked forward, he'd see a whole world ready to be explored.

If he looked up, he'd see the stars. An endless cosmos.

There would be true peace awaiting him somewhere in it. Somewhere. He could have anything he ever wanted again. He could have it all.

All he needed to do was find the courage to go out and find it. He just needed to let go of his guilt and do the right thing.

But despite it all, despite the reveal it wasn't too late, he did nothing. He stayed where he was in both mind and body. Dream never apologized, and his beloved stars would remain of cold obsidian until he did. They would have to wait a long while.

An eternity of damnation of his own making was all he would know.

So be it.

THE END

Well.

Here we are, the ending. The last chapter of a long story I took two years, thousands of pages and hundreds of thousands of words to tell—and here it is, done.

Of course, strictly speaking, no it isn't. There is still so much that could still be told, as with every story, but it's not my place to do so. It has all been neatly wrapped up by my hand. Perhaps I will dabble in a couple of oneshots here and there, but nothing more than that.

Thank you all so much for your continued support, for choosing to travel this canon-divergent path with me despite all the tears and heartache I have put you all through. Sorry not sorry for those by the way.

Anyway, once again I thank you all for being such awesome readers with nerves of steel, ungodly reading habits, and some of the kindest words I've ever received.

Until we meet again,

-Iphiko

~~PS: this author's note will be published in a separate chapter at a later date as to not screw up the update functions that occasionally seem to bug out with Quotev~~
